

REGINALD,

OR THE

HOUSE OF MIRANDOLA.



A Romance.



IN THREE VOLUMES.



BY

THE AUTHOR OF MELBOURNE, &c.



“ All solemn things
“ Should answer solemn accidents !—The matter ?
“ Triumphs for nothing, and laments for toys,
“ Is jollity for apes, and grief for boys !”

CYMBELINE.



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REGINALD.

CHAP. I.

“ Something I’d unfold—

“ For something still there lies in Heaven’s dark volume,

“ Which I read thro’ mists.

DRYDEN’S *ŒDIPUS*.

THE morning after Sigismond had held so hasty a conference with the prisoner Bertoldo, he had determined to renew his examination of the turret where the late unfortunate Marquis had been confined, though he knew not to what purpose but to sooth the melancholy of his soul. He was however interrupted in his purpose by the arrival of an *avant courier*, with intelligence that

the Prince was on his way home, and would reach the castle in a few hours.

Sigismond regretted this circumstance, as he felt more restrained in his plans while the Prince was in the way ; he resolved, however, that nothing should long detain him from finding a way to the grating in the court-yard, where Father Bertoldo wished him to come, under an idea that they should there converse with more facility. His humanity and his curiosity were almost equally powerful incentives to the renewal of this visit ; but the present was not a moment favourable to the research, as all the attendants remaining in the castle were busied in preparing for their Lord's return, and were frequently passing to and fro in all directions.

Sigismond then had nothing to do but to spend the interval quietly in his own apartment ; and never did hours seem longer than those in which he was thus precluded from exertion.

At length the bustle below seemed increased, and the great portal horn announced the

the arrival of the Prince and his party.—Sigismond now momentarily expected a summons to attend the Prince; but hour after hour elapsed, and no summons arrived.

The shades of the evening began to gather around, and Sigismond was yet a prisoner in his own chamber. He began to fear that the report of Signor Vitalba, respecting the intended conference with Ghiberti, which had been so cruelly interrupted the night previous to the journey to Venice, had been the occasion of this increased rigour, and he could not but apprehend that he should feel its ill effects in more respects than this.

The evening passed wholly away—the night arrived, and Sigismond had not yet been summoned. He felt his blood boil indignantly within him, and as he gazed at the portrait of Mirandola, he vowed to exert himself to obtain either better treatment or an absolute release.

“To what purpose,” exclaimed he, “have I vowed to make that maxim the rule of my life, if I suffer day after day to

pass on in a shameful inactivity, detained in captivity for no cause but to gratify the will of a tyrant, and making no effort to surmount that will.

He paced the gallery with hurried and unequal steps—he strove to listen to the mingled hum of voices which he guessed was now murmuring in the great hall below; but no sound met his ear; he was too distant from the inhabited parts of the edifice to catch even the roar of gaiety, and he felt his solitude most absolute.

At length he heard a footstep—his heart palpitated. Was it the Prince coming to see him?—was it Vitalba?—was it his friend Ghiberti?—or, was it merely a summons to the oak parlour?

He watched with impatience the unclosing of the door, and felt severely disappointed when only Benedetto appeared as usual with lights, provisions, and firing. The old man deposited his load, and was retiring without speaking; but Sigismund said—

“ Nay,

"Nay, Benedetto, but tell me—the Prince is arrived?"

"Yes, Signor."

"And has not asked for me?"

"No, Signor, he only asked if you were well."

"And has he any one with him?"

"The same party," replied Benedetto, "except the Signor Pigliani, who is daily expected."

"Shall I be sent for to-morrow, Benedetto?" said the youth.

"Really, Signor, I cannot tell," replied Benedetto; "but a strange thing has happened."

"What's that?" asked Sigismond.

"I know not whether I may tell; yet," added Benedetto, "it can be no secret—Ghiberti is not returned."

"No!" exclaimed the youth.

"No, Signor; and Francisco says he never will;—but how should Francisco know any thing of the matter?"

" True," replied Sigismond ; " but, Benedetto, will you tell the Prince I wish to see him ?"

" My Lord the Prince," answered Benedetto, " is retired to rest."

" Well, but to-morrow, Benedetto ?"

" Perhaps I may, Signor, I can't tell."

" And are all the servants gone to bed ?"

" No, Signor, don't you see I am up ?"

" True, Benedetto ;—but the travellers ?"

" No, no, they have enough to talk over.—Farewel, Signor."

" Good night, Benedetto."

The old man departed.

Sigismond could not now entertain a doubt that it was owing to the representation of Signor Vitalba, that Ghiberti had been discharged, and that himself remained thus a prisoner ; nor did he feel convinced that Ghiberti had been only discharged.—There was a sort of expression in Benedetto's countenance when he mentioned the circumstance, which seemed to imply more than the dismissal

dismissal of a servant. He had said he was not returned—perhaps he never would return.—What then, had his friendship for him cost him his liberty—perhaps his life?—Was the mere wishing to serve him so obnoxious to Rezzonico, that he would suffer no one to entertain such a wish?

No new misfortunes had befallen him; yet he felt unusually oppressed this night, and a melancholy he could not repress, kept him waking the greatest part of it. The succeeding morning Benedetto came to summon him to the Prince, whom he found alone in the oak parlour. His countenance was stern, and he returned the compliments of Sigismond with an air of coldness and displeasure that awoke all the irritable passions in his young bosom; yet, determined as he was to make some enquiries into the cause of his detention, he felt for a while awed by the Prince's manner, until at length turning to him, he said—

“ I understand, young man, you wished to see me—what have you to say ?”

“ I have to enquire, my Lord,” replied Sigismond, with an undaunted air, “ why I am detained a prisoner ?—When I was decoyed from Colano, whence force would in vain have attempted to remove me, I was seduced with flattering promises of finding a noble and illustrious father ready to fold me to his bosom, and acknowledge me the heir of an ancient and honourable house.—How have I been deceived !—By what unfounded tale of that father’s recent death have I been imposed on since my arrival here !—I see no signs, I hear no particulars of an event so interesting to me !—I am kept a prisoner in a decayed and ruined chamber, apart from the family, treated like an obscure and obnoxious dependant, every circumstance relating to myself carefully kept from me, and my imagination left to wander over a thousand images of horror !—Why is this, my Lord ?—When shall I be enabled to investigate the circumstances of my birth, or permitted to return to those peaceful shades I have so much reason to regret quitting ?”

“ Have

“ Have you done, Sir?” said the Prince, perceiving that he stopped; “ or is there any more of this harangue I am to be condemned to hear?—If you wish it, speak on.”

“ I wish only now, my Lord, for an answer,” said the youth.

“ And you shall have it, Sir,” retorted the Prince; “ you are anxious to investigate your birth; rest satisfied—a few days will disclose it to you, and you will know it too soon for your peace.—You wish for liberty—take it, and use it well.—Liberty I mean, not to depart from Voltorno, but to live with me.—No more private conferences with servants—Ghiberti indeed you will see no more.—Nay, no excuses,” continued the Prince, seeing him about to speak, “ I am above retorting on you, or reflecting on what is past.—Let me see in you some of the natural graces and gaiety of youth—be easy with my company, lend yourself to their manners, their amusements; for, believe me,

Sigismond, whatever misfortunes may overwhelm you, I wish you happy."

With these words the Prince withdrew, leaving Sigismond alone in the oak parlour. He was unable to comprehend the whole of the Prince's speech; but his candid mind began to reflect whether he had not perhaps been wrong, and the moment such an idea seized him, it required no deliberation to make him determine to endeavour to be more right.—Yet what could Rezzonico mean by saying he would know the secret of his birth too soon for his peace?—What terrible mystery was to be unfolded?

He walked and ruminated, but could find no clue to this circumstance, and his meditations were soon disturbed by the entrance of Valenti, who flew to him with an air of gaiety, and expressed much joy at seeing him again. After a great deal of frivolous chat, Valenti said—

"Are you to be one of the candidates for the hand of the beauty that is daily expected here?"

"What

"What beauty?" exclaimed Sigismond,
"I have heard of none."

"Oh yes," repeated Valenti, "she is
daily expected here."

"And from whence?" cried Sigismond.

"Oh I know not," replied Valenti; "but
from some place a good way off.—Pigliani
and myself are, I know, to strive for her fa-
vour; but Pigliani has had a very unfair ad-
vantage over me—he has been sent to fetch
her."

"Oh Heavens!" groaned Sigismond,
on whose ready mind the idea of Agnes in-
stantly glanced.

"You seem much concerned, my friend,"
said Valenti; "do you suspect that Pigliani
would make the best of his situation?"

"Villain!" muttered Sigismond; "sure
he would not dare!"

"Oh! that Pigliani dares do a great deal
I promise you," retorted Valenti, who did
not fathom the whole of Sigismond's mean-
ing; "not that I fear him.—I think, when

the young lady arrives, if her taste be to decide, Pigliani will stand but little chance."

"But who is this lady?" again enquired Sigismond.

"I tell you," replied Valenti, "I am utterly ignorant;—but I understand her beauty is unequalled."

To the fancy of Sigismond this account could only apply to Agnes, and his soul sickened at the idea. He strove, however, to change the subject of conversation, and the rest of the party appearing, it was no more renewed.

Fearful lest he had wronged the Prince by too readily admitting suspicions of him, Sigismond endeavoured to lend himself to the company, and to give way to the natural gaiety of his disposition; but oppressed by a thousand apprehensions, he found this impossible, even if he could have persuaded his heart not to distrust the countenance of Rezzonico, for whom he in vain strove to conquer his antipathy.

As

As he found himself now, however, at liberty to go where he pleased about the castle, he determined to chuse an hour when he was least likely to be observed, to visit the grating of Bertoldo's prison ; but for some days found it utterly impossible to obtain the opportunity he sought. At length, however, all the cavaliers were engaged in the chase, except himself and the Prince, who had desired to be left alone ; and Sigismond determined to avail himself of so favourable a moment.

As he was no longer a prisoner, he found no difficulty in reaching the inner court ; and having remarked that the stream of light from Federico's lamp, when he visited Bertoldo, always proceeded from a central spot in the court, he readily discovered the grating which admitted to that wretched cell its scanty portion of Heaven's general blessings—air and light.

Throwing himself upon the ground, he pronounced the name of Bertoldo, and was answered only by a deep groan ; he repeated

peated the name of the Father, and hinted that he was his former visiter returned, as he had desired, to the place he had pointed out.

Bertoldo now evidently approached the grating, and in a feeble voice, said—

“ My good youth, I am very ill—the hand of death is, I fear, upon me ;—yet why should I fear it—what reason have I to wish for life?”

“ Alas, Father!” said Sigismond, “ can no means be found to assist you?—Must you suffer in this dungeon, without help?”

“ Such,” replied Bertoldo, “ is the will of him by whose command I suffer.—I am supposed dead ;—yet I wish to prolong my life till I could have deposited in some faithful bosom the secrets which have cost me my liberty, and shortened my days ;—they are important to some one—but it is dangerous to know too much.”

“ My good Father,” exclaimed the youth, “ is it for this knowledge you are here immured?”

“ I

“ I fear so,” answered Bertoldo ; “ yet I would wish to make some one partaker of my intelligence ; because there may arrive a moment when it may promote the cause of justice.”

“ And to whom,” said the youth, “ would you wish to confide it ?”

“ To you,” replied Bertoldo, “ if you shrink not from the communication.—Your voluntarily seeking me proves the benevolence of your heart, and I can commit my important secret to your integrity ;—but beware—let not Rezzonico know that you are in possession of it ;—though he, familiar as he is with blood, yet hesitated to secure my silence by death, he may not always be so forbearing —Speak, Signor, will you accept the confidence I offer ?”

“ I will,” replied Sigismond.

“ Swear then,” said Bertoldo, in a solemn voice, “ swear to promote the cause of injured innocence whenever it may be in your power !—Swear, whenever any events
occur

occur to enable you to act, that you will be faithful and firm !”

“ I have already sworn that,” said the youth, struck at the odd coincidence of the words.

“ When ?” asked Bertoldo.

“ Ere I left Colano ; and since I have been here,” resumed Sigismond, “ I have more than once sworn to be faithful and firm.”

“ Who art thou ?” demanded Bertoldo.

“ I know not,” answered Sigismond.

“ Who,” said the Father, “ imposed the oath ?”

“ Father Buonafede, first,” replied the youth ; “ and I have voluntarily repeated it.”

“ What do you know of your origin ?” again enquired Bertoldo.

“ Scarcely any thing,” replied Sigismond.

“ But your intelligence, my good Father ?— my long absence will be observed.”

“ Some other time,” said Bertoldo, “ you must tell me all you know of your origin.—

Now

Now listen and observe:—Rezzonico has no rightful claim to what he enjoys!—The heir of Mirandola did survive the last Marquis, who died prematurely—Rezzonico knew he died prematurely.—My strength will not now permit me to relate all the particulars that might corroborate this tale—but Father Zadeski knows them all.”

“What do you mean?” enquired Sigismond; “was Rezzonico accessory?”

“Hush!” interposed Bertoldo, “what I have said, I have said.”

“And the heir of Mirandola,” rejoined Sigismond, “was it male or female?”

“I know not,” replied Bertoldo; “the Marchioness went hence on the premature death of the Marquis, and her child was——”

Bertoldo suddenly ceased speaking, and a ray of light informed Sigismond that Federico was just arrived with provisions for the wretched prisoner. As this circumstance recalled his attention to outward objects, he perceived that the shades
of

of evening already covered the face of Nature, and already were the servants securing the doors of the castle.

Federico still lingered in the dungeon, and Sigismond, fearful lest he should be shut out of the building, and thus his visit to the Father be discovered, was reluctantly obliged to regain the passage by which he had entered the court, and defer till another opportunity the unfinished story of Bertoldo. His mind, however, found in it full occupation, and he felt himself unequal to return to the saloon, and mingle in the conversation with the other cavaliers;—he retired, therefore, to his own solitary chamber, where he ruminated on the mysterious tale he had just heard, which so fully corroborated all his suspicions.

Mirandola had perished prematurely !
Alas ! that skeleton was then the remains of the murdered Marquis !—Murdered ! and by whom ?—Just Heaven ! by the present possessor of his wealth and honours !—Rezzonico then was indeed a murderer :—He had
first

first caused the wretched Mirandola to be waylaid, and then confined in his own castle. Oh dreadful fate!—the sufferings he had endured were but too faithfully painted in the foul-harrowing inscriptions Sigismond had read in the turret. He had then been dragged to the subterranean cells for the completion of his fate, and perhaps had received it on that very staircase in his struggles against the ruffians!

The thoughts of the youth then dwelt on the miserable Marchioness and her hapless offspring;—still he believed Madame St. Clair and Agnes to have been the unfortunate survivors of the murdered Mirandola, and the thought induced him willingly to renew the vow Father Bertoldo had made him take, to be faithful and firm in the cause of justice and innocence.

He determined to seek another interview with Father Bertoldo, and then to endeavour to liberate himself from Voltorno, and obtain from Zadeski a further confirmation of his suspicions.

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In meditations like these Sigismond passed the night, and shuddered when the morning dawned through his ivy-hung windows, at the thought of again beholding Rezzonico, whom he now considered with redoubled horror. He suffered hour after hour to elapse, unable to visit the parlour, till at length he was informed the Prince desired his company. He obeyed the summons—his feet moved towards the door of the oak parlour—his hand trembled on the lock—he opened it, and beheld—Agnes!

Unable, even in the presence of the Prince, to restrain his emotions, he flew to her—he clasped her in his arms—he besought her to smile once more on the wretched Sigismond!

“I thought so,” exclaimed Rezzonico, in a voice of thunder; “stand off, audacious boy—respect my presence!”

“You have no right, my Lord,” said Sigismond, firmly, “to dissolve ties formed long before your interference in our affairs—formed when we were happy!”

“You

"You know not what you say, Sigismond," replied Rezzonico; "but for my interference, you had been—alas! you know not what!" added he in a lower voice, and shuddering.

Sigismond undauntedly replied—

"But for you, Prince Rezzonico, we had been obscure and happy!—But since you have dragged us both from our seclusion, let me now, unappalled by your greatness, claim our respective rights?—For myself, my name, my rank, my liberty, the inheritance of my father!—For Agnes, what I am persuaded is her due, the heirdom of Mirandola!"

A deathlike paleness overspread the features of the Prince, and was succeeded by the glow of rage and indignation.—Agnes, trembling, had sunk on a couch, but now rising, caught Sigismond's arm, which he had extended in the vehemence of his emotions, and faintly exclaimed—

"Speak not thus, Sigismond, to——"

"Peace!" interrupted the Prince, and Agnes, appalled, sunk again on the sofa.

"You

“ You shall have your will,” resumed Rezzonico, turning to Sigismond ; “ your impetuosity has accelerated the discovery you will in vain wish to retard.—Agnes shall hereafter possess the heirdom of Mirandola, when I, her father, resign it to her in the course of nature.—But for you, unhappy boy ! my soul bleeds for you !—Stand from her—touch her not—she is thy sister !”

The agonized Sigismond threw himself far from Agnes, and gazed silently on the face of Rezzonico.—A thousand varying passions seemed there to strive for mastery, and at length, in a subdued voice, he again spoke—

“ Yes, Sigismond, you are my son !—Agnes is my daughter !—but the same mother gave not birth to both.—Seek to know no more—seek not to learn the dishonour of your parents !”

Sigismond gazed on the pallid form of Agnes, who, now sunk lifeless on the couch, had lost in a happy insensibility the immediate consciousness of her misery.—He threw himself at the feet of the Prince—

“ Tell

“ Tell me all,” he said, “ that the knowledge of my whole wretchedness may at once extinguish this hated life !—If there be yet more of horror, tell me now, while the poor Agnes will not hear it !”

“ Alas !” replied the Prince, “ you had better remain ignorant of the guilt—the unintentional guilt of your father.—Yet learn it all :—Your mother was the wife—the mother of Agnes was the sister of Mirandola, both the offspring of love, unsanctified by the ties of marriage—too nearly connected on both sides.—Fly, unhappy youth ! and never cast another thought on Agnes.”

“ Alas, my father !” said Sigismond, “ am I then only to know thee, to curse my birth—to wish I had never seen the light !—Yet bless me, my father, and suffer thy wretched son to go for ever from thy presence !”

“ Retire now, my son,” replied the Prince, “ to thy own chamber—there endeavour to regain thy fortitude ;—to-morrow we will converse more at large on this subject, and
thou

thou shalt then have thy liberty.—But leave me now ; returning life begins to glow in the faded cheek of thy sister—she needs all my care.—Retire, my son—recal thy virtuous principles, thy firmness, thy patience—to-morrow I will give thee the sad detail of a life embittered, and perhaps made guilty, by contending passions.”

Sigismund retired without daring to cast another look on Agnes, who still lay senseless on the sofa, and sought his melancholy chamber ; but in vain he sought for fortitude, for firmness ;—the greatness of the evil well-nigh overwhelmed his senses, and he remained, wandering up and down the corridor, bereft of every distinct idea.

CHAP. II.

“ When such as thou, with sacrilegious hand,
“ Seize on the apostolic key of heaven,
“ It then becomes a tool for crafty knaves,
“ To shut out virtue, and unfold those gates
“ That Heaven itself had shut.”

BROOKE.

AFTER Sigismond had quitted his newly discovered father, the Prince committed Agnes to the care of her woman, and ordered her to be put to bed. She lay still insensible, and it was to be apprehended that the greatness and suddenness of the shock had for ever deprived her of her intellects.

The Prince then summoned the Monk, Regolo Carucci, and ordered all others to be excluded.

“ My good Father,” began the Prince, “ to you I have confessed the weighty crimes to which my ungoverned passions have prompted me.—You are already sensible that Agnes and Sigismond are both children of my love, by the sister and the wife of the late possessor of these estates.—I love not to publish the guilt of one, whose greatest fault, perhaps, was originally her passion for me ; —but, alas ! I fear that the unhappy Marchioness, led astray by that passion, hoped to conceal her infamy by putting an end to the life of her husband. Sigismond was born some months previous to the diabolical and too successful attack on the unfortunate Marquis ;—by whose premature death—a death I can never forbear, in my own mind, accusing the abandoned Hypolita of causing, I was put in possession of these estates.—I have just acknowledged to Sigismond the unfortunate and near connexion between himself
and

and Agnes ; and severely did the heart of a parent suffer from witnessing the overwhelming grief of which he himself had been the primary and guilty cause.—Alas ! Carucci, I sometimes doubt the power of the absolution I have obtained, to cleanse my oppressed conscience from its black stains.”

“ My Prince,” replied Carucci, “ I have already more than once exhausted all arguments on this topic, and more than once have had the good fortune to quiet these apprehensions.—Recollect, I beseech you, that the reasonings which have already convinced you, still exist in all their force, and that conviction, once really obtained, ought never to yield to any subsequent impressions.”

“ Be that as it may,” answered the Prince, “ a new apprehension has taken possession of my soul.—Sigismond, at first overwhelmed with grief, was all duty and submission, besought my blessing, and seemed ready to obey my command ; at length his former horrible love for Agnes overpowered his new feelings, and, with a dreadful oath, he pro-

feſſed his diſbelief of the tale, declared himſelf convinced that he was the rightful heir of Mirandola, and left me, vowing vengeance on the man who had dared to defame the memory of his mother.—Poor youth! I wonder not at his unbelief—I pity the feelings which have well-nigh ſeated reaſon. It is ſurely a more pleaſing romance that he has formed to himſelf, of being indeed the heir of Mirandola, than of being a child of infamy, who has blaſted the fair fame of his mother.—Yet, Carucci, his paſſion is dangerous.—That I have erred is too well known, and the world is too prone to believe all crimes poſſible where ſome are confeſſed;—ſhould this youth quit Voltorno, he may raiſe a party to himſelf, and burden his conſcience with the fate of the man he will hereafter find to have been his father. Save my ſon, dear Carucci, from this heavy crime;—let me not entail on my offspring a greater depravity than that of their unfortunate father.—He will wade to the arms
of

of his sister through the blood of their common parent."

"How can I, my Prince," asked Carucci, "prevent this?"

"You are wholly master of the subject," replied Rezzonico, "you are capable of adducing all kinds of arguments.—If you have succeeded in convincing me, in calming my passions, shall you not have more influence over a youth, whose mind must be less strong than that of a man practised, like me, in exertion and active thought?"

"I will endeavour," replied Carucci, thoughtfully.

"If you endeavour, with your heart in the cause," said the Prince, "you will, by some means or other, succeed.—Remember, Carucci, the life of your patron depends on you—and his unfailing friendship will for ever attend the man who shall assure him he has nothing to fear from Sigismond."

"That man shall be me," answered the Priest.

“ I have interest at Rome,” resumed the Prince; “ three Cardinals now in the Conclave owe their hats to me.”

“ Your Highness shall have nothing to fear from Sigismond,” repeated Carucci.

“ I can be properly grateful for a service,” continued Rezzonico; “ an intelligent friend shall never find me deficient in acknowledging or rewarding his exertions.”

“ Your Highness shall ever command my best endeavours,” interposed the Monk: “ quiet your too tender conscience, my Prince, and fear nothing from Sigismond.”

The Prince wrung the hand of Carucci, and joined the other cavaliers.

Sigismond, meanwhile, in his solitary chamber, mused on the strange intelligence he had just obtained. He knew not how either to give or to refuse it credit; yet, to blast the fair fame of the Marchiness di Mirandola, who had always borne so fair a character, seemed little less than sacrilege. His soul revolted from believing himself the son of Rezzonico—he felt no impulse of
nature

nature in his heart—the Prince appeared to feel none towards him ;—he had inflicted the dreadful blow with the malice of an inveterate enemy, rather than with the tenderness of a father ; and the compassion he had afterwards displayed, seemed rather assumed than real : an expression of malignant hatred scowled in his eye, and contradicted the words of affection his lips had uttered.—Yet too fatally did he feel convinced that Agnes was indeed his child :—the story of Madame St. Clair was but too clearly explained by this terrible avowal ; her relationship to Mirandola too, accounted for many circumstances till now inexplicable ; and if one part of this horrible relation were true, the rest might not be false.

The Marchioness di Mirandola could not be a more estimable woman than Madame St. Clair had appeared. Yet could he suppose—could he bear to imagine himself her adulterous offspring by Rezzonico ?—He turned in agony from the dreadful suggestion ; and his feelings rose almost to mad-

ness when he thought of Agnes, whom he must never again behold—whom he must drive from his heart—whom it was impious to love !

Again he ceased to meditate distinctly, and hours had passed uncounted in the terrible extreme of misery, when an approaching footstep aroused him ; he looked up, and beheld the Monk Carucci, followed by Benedetto, who bore his usual provisions.—Benedetto set down his burthen in silence, and departed.

Sigismond cast his eyes on Carucci, and again averted them ;—it was not to him he could unburthen his bosom of the load of grief that oppressed him—his soul refused to repose confidence in the Monk, and he continued to traverse the gallery with a hurried step, when the Monk, approaching him, took his hand, and besought him to compose his spirits.

“ I know,” said he, “ the causes of your present agitation, and I own they are amply sufficient

sufficient to render you restless and uneasy ; but, my dear young Signor, let me entreat you to calm your mind, and to summon to your aid those virtuous principles and that vigorous philosophy I know you possess."

Sigismond turned indignant from a declamation so little calculated to produce any effect ; at length, fixing his eager eyes on the Monk—

" You say," he exclaimed, " that you know the causes of my present agitation ;—it is more than I do distinctly !—Relate to me then the whole horrible tale, that I may at once see and know all I have to support ! Yet what need of more particulars ?—I am the brother of Agnes—my mother was dishonoured—Rezzonico is my father.—What need of more ?"

In vain the Monk began a new harangue on the necessity of patience. Sigismond, lost in despair, pretended not to listen—he assumed not even the appearance of attention, but gave way to emotions of the most violent grief. When this burst of anguish

had a little subsided, Carucci again spoke ; he spoke of Agnes—he vaunted her patience, her resignation, her entreaties to Sigismond to submit to the inevitable decrees of Heaven.

“ Tell the dear sufferer, said she,” thus continued Carucci, “ that the guiding hand of Providence is evident in our fate, deplorable as it is. Had our union been completed, what would have become of two such involuntary offenders?—How would my Sigismond—how should I have supported the consciousness of so dreadful a crime, though so unintentionally committed?—Oh press these arguments home to his heart, if indeed it speak not itself most powerfully in the same language !”

Sigismond now listened, and wept ; and Carucci, finding he had gained some hold of his attention, artfully interwove with his harangue a pathetic account of the grief and paternal affection of Rezzonico, and of his earnest wish that Sigismond would endeavour to subdue the violence of the sorrow it

was

was so natural he should feel, and remain in his present apartment for a while, since it was better that he and Agnes should meet no more, until they could meet as brother and sister.

“That,” exclaimed Sigismond, “will never be, I fear.—But not long shall I bear about this load of misery!—It cannot be—human nature could not long support such exquisite torture:—blasted in every dearest hope, my birth stigmatized, my mother dishonoured, and my love made guilty—what has this world to offer me as a recompence for evils of such magnitude and variety?”

“It has yet much to offer,” replied Carucci, “much worthy even of your attention.—The Prince, your father, will atone to you, by his unvaried kindness, by his liberality and munificence, for the injuries Fortune has done you;—the stigma on your birth will be legally taken off, and you will be declared inheritor of the honours and wealth of Rezzonico.—Recover then, young Signor, your composure, and do not throw from you

that life which Heaven and Fortune yet unite to bless and to distinguish."

"You offer me, Holy Father, consolation very inadequate to my sufferings; but it is probably the best the case will allow of. My better hope is that I shall not long feel my misery; and as it has not been occasioned by my own fault, its further consequences are not to be dreaded."

"I need not," said Carucci, "to a man whose principles appear so well founded, argue on the impiety of self-murder—you, Signor, would recoil from such a deed!"

"Of any murder," replied Sigismond, "I trust I am incapable. You may rest assured I shall not attempt to destroy myself; but the heart-broken, Holy Father, need not sword or poison!"

"You are young, Signor," interposed the Monk, "and you feel acutely;—what now seems impossible to be borne, you, not unnaturally, conclude will always be equally dreadful, and the pangs you suffer, you imagine have broken your heart;—but believe me,

me, Signor, believe a man whom Experience has tutored in the school of Adversity, very severe misfortunes indeed may be supported by a proper and philosophical equanimity of mind.—At least, Signor, assure me, not only that you will not seek to harm yourself, but also that you will not refuse the means of life. Here is food——”

“ I cannot eat now,” interrupted Sigismond ; “ but to refuse food when nature calls for it, would be to seek my own destruction.—You need not fear this—I have resolved against it ;—but I am not now sufficiently composed, Holy Father, to listen to, or profit by, your consolations. Suffer me to endeavour in solitude to regain some firmness of mind—I shall not attempt to invade the retirement of either the Prince or Agnes.”

Carucci took his leave, after another unsuccessful attempt to recommend the viands to Sigismond, who, lost in a whirlpool of agony, scarcely noticed his departure, nor the entrance of another person. At length
the

the sound of his name, hastily uttered, caused him to look up, and he beheld a menial servant, whom, after some minutes, he recognized for Francisco, the comrade of Ghiberti during their journey.

“Signor,” said Francisco, in a hurried voice, “forgive my intrusion; but I come to warn you of evil:—Eat not those provisions; they were privately prepared by Carucci, who means you no good.—As soon as it is possible, I will bring you some wholesome food. Farewel, Signor;” and Francisco was instantly out of sight.

This intelligence caused a momentary revulsion in the breast of Sigismond, and for an instant inclined him to doubt the truth of the dreadful tale he had just learned.—If he were indeed the son of Rezzonico, could that father seek his death? for he was convinced that the Monk acted merely as a tool under the commands of the Prince.—Yet, if this newly discovered son, who shewed no dispositions towards implicit obedience, stood in the way of a projected alliance between

tween the Lady Agnes and one of the friends of Rezzonico, who expected from such an union to inherit all the immense possessions of the Prince, he had no principles, no paternal affection to prevent him from sacrificing this son to a new project.— Yet, so dear is hope to the youthful bosom, that Sigismond could not wholly relinquish that which this surmise had occasioned, and determined, at an hour when least liable to observation, to revisit the dungeon of Bertoldo, and from him to obtain all possible information respecting the family and offspring of the late Marquis.

He was acknowledged by the Prince to be the child of the Marchioness—Ah! then was Hypolita, the virtuous Hypolita capable of infidelity to so noble a husband?— He resolved to communicate to Bertoldo every circumstance he could recollect, and he felt that infant hope renewed.

While he yet revolved these thoughts, Francisco returned with fresh provisions, and having placed it on the table, said—

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“ I pray you to pardon my boldness, Signor ; but condescend to use some caution. The Monk will soon pay you another visit—conceal these fresh provisions, and let him believe that you have tasted those he brought. Indeed, Signor, there is evil intended you.—Federico and Spigno were closetted with my Lord the Prince and Father Regolo, and those consultations cannot bode any good to you.”

“ Why, Francisco,” said Sigismond, “ do you know that the Prince has acknowledged me as his son ?”

“ Ah Signor !” resumed Francisco, “ he knows better ;—he was struck with the same resemblance in you, that both poor Ghiberti and I saw.—I wish poor Ghiberti were here ; he could tell you more, Signor, than I can ; but there have been foul doings in these apartments, and indeed, if you are not careful, there may be more.”

“ And when, Francisco,” enquired Sigismond, “ is Carucci likely to visit me ?”

“ Ere

“ Ere long, Signor ; and if he does not find that you have tasted his food—God forgive me ! but I am sure it is poisoned—he will think you suspect him ; and Federico and Spigno will use surer means.”

“ And they are welcome,” said the youth, “ for I am so miserable, Francisco, that life is a burthen to me ;—however, I will endeavour to preserve it, and I thank you for your affection ; if ever it be in my power, I will reward it.”

Francisco now departed, and Sigismond followed the honest creature’s advice, so as to lead Carucci to suppose that he had eaten of the food he had brought, while the viands Francisco had provided, he secreted in one of the deserted chambers, resolving, as soon as the Monk had again visited him, to explore once more his way to the dungeon of Bertoldo.

He gazed on the portrait of Mirandola, and vowed to do all in his power to preserve his own life, since for him it seemed reserved
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to develope the mysteries that hung over the fate of the unfortunate Marquis.

Scarcely had he prepared every thing to deceive the Monk, ere he heard his approaching footsteps ; and when he entered, thought a malicious disappointment scowled on his hypocritical features, as he perceived Sigismond yet walking in apparent uninjured health. When, however, he repeated his enquiries, and learned that he had at length tasted the food, and saw that part of it was gone, a malignant satisfaction glared in his eyes ; and he commended the philosophy and resignation of the youth, who, under such heavy trials, yet sought to sustain a life which must be odious to him, because he felt it his duty to support the inflictions of Heaven.

The very soul of Sigismond recoiled to hear the most pious doctrines thus perverted in the mouth of a hypocrite, for the most atrocious purposes ; but he also dissembled, and after a short interview the Father departed, satisfied that there would be no
need

need to use more desperate means, and that the sudden dissolution of Sigismond might well be attributed to his own despair, which would sufficiently account for any suspicions of poison that might arise on the inspection of the body.

Meanwhile all the inhabitants of the castle retired to their respective chambers, and Sigismond resolved to explore the subterraneous passages to the dungeon of Bertoldo.

CHAP. III.

“ Think you I am no stronger than my sex ? ”

JULIUS CÆSAR.

“ Hope springs *eternal* in the human breast.”

POPE.

THE castle-clock had just tolled one, when Sigismond, taking his lamp, prepared to explore his way through the deserted apartments to the subterraneous cell, where the wretched Bertoldo lay confined.

He removed his bed, and entered the chamber formerly appropriated to the unfortunate Mirandola. A thousand gloomy reflections crossed his mind as he traversed
this

this chamber ;—new ideas with respect to the real heir of Mirandola, had occurred to him ; but rendered improbable as they were by the avowal of Rezzonico, he dared not trust to the suggestions of his fancy. He passed the suite of rooms, and descending the staircase, entered the lower corresponding apartments, carefully guarding the lamp he carried from streaming through the crevices of the decayed window-shutters. He found the well-remembered trap-door, and passing down the steps, soon reached the vaults of the castle. He perfectly recollected the cell of Bertoldo, and was in a few minutes before its door, which being low, plated with iron, thick, and strongly barred, was able to resist the attempts of a less infirm inmate than the old Priest.—Then reflecting that, unapprised of his visit, Bertoldo might be enjoying the blessings of slumber, he hesitated whether to announce his arrival, and dissipate the only comfort of the wretched ;—for a moment he listened, and a repetition of low groans immediately convinced him that the unhappy

happy prisoner enjoyed not the relief of temporary forgetfulness, and he tapped at the door of the cell. A feeble voice exclaimed—

“ Who is there ? ”

He replied—

“ It is I—Sigismond.”

Bertoldo immediately, though slowly, dragged his infirm limbs towards the door, and in faltering accents thus expressed himself—

“ The hand of Death is upon me !—Fly, Sigismond, from this accursed castle—thy idea has haunted me day and night, and I am sure no good is intended thee.—Fly instantly ! ”

The youth would willingly have drawn from the dying Bertoldo some further explanation of the mystery of the Marquis's fate and family ; but the poor old man's weakness was too great to allow him to make himself heard through the door, and he was only able to add—

“ Seek Zadeski ! ”

With

With this interrupted and unsatisfactory conversation Sigismond was obliged to retire ; and as he retraced the winding passages of the subterranean caverns, he formed a hasty plan for his flight from an abode where he had known only misery and sorrow.

He reached the ground-floor in safety, and sprang hastily up the stairs to the apartments that communicated with his own chamber ;—here a ray of light streaming through the rooms, first alarmed him, and veiling his lamp, he advanced cautiously.—A sound of human voices convinced him some people were searching for him, and he heard a voice, which he recognized for that of Federico, saying—

“ He must have escaped through these rooms.”

Another person answered in a lower tone, so that his words reached not the ear of Sigismond ; and Federico replied—

“ I will not advance—the recollection of what I once witnessed in those chambers, dismays me.”

“ Pol-

“ Poltroon !” exclaimed the other voice ;
“ give me the dagger then, and I will seek him !”

Too well convinced that his life was now really sought after (for in the other voice his ear acknowledged the tone of Spigno) Sigismond debated how to proceed.—Federico seemed appalled by conscience and memory ; but Spigno was a hardened villain, incapable of remorse. He was unarmed—they were prepared ;—he could not even sell his life dearly ; and hearing them still arguing the point, he stopped no longer to listen, but proceeding through the lower range of rooms, regained the vaults in safety, and passing again the door of Bertoldo’s cell, hoped to find in the windings of those subterranean passages some place where he might remain concealed, or some means of escaping to the upper part of the castle, and perhaps of wholly effecting his liberation.

Swiftly he passed on, till at length he perceived a staircase, which he ascended, and reached a noble landing-place, which, from
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the number of steps he had mounted, seemed level with the chambers of the castle;— of this he was convinced, when looking over a balustrade which bounded the landing-place, he perceived the great hall of the castle, where a few dying embers still gave, at intervals, feeble flashes of light.

The doors that opened into the corridor, were then the doors of the different bedrooms, and he might chance to open that of the Prince. He stood bewildered and confused, irresolute how to act, not knowing whither to fly, or where to seek for refuge.

He traversed the corridor with light and noiseless steps, and perceived a door ajar. It did not occur to him that this door might have been left so, to enable the murderers with more celerity to convey the news of their success to their employer; he only reflected that probably only the door of an unoccupied room would be left open, and he entered. The room was small, dark, and uninhabited, and seemed only the anti-room

to a larger apartment; and a line of light from under the door convinced him that the next room was not only inhabited, but that probably its inmate was not yet at rest.—He approached the door to listen if any noise could inform him of any circumstance, as every moment now seemed pregnant with important events. He paused a moment—heard a voice—attempted the door—it yielded, and he beheld the form of his beloved Agnes!—A faint scream from her convinced him that she perceived him—he was at her feet, grasping her hand—she shuddered, turned pale, and strove to disengage herself from him, and the word *brother* seemed struggling in vain to burst from her lips.

“Fear nothing, Agnes,” said the agonized youth; “I am going for ever, unless I can clear up the mysteries that surround us.—Agnes, be not deceived—there is no proof that the Prince’s assertions are true. Yield not too lightly your belief to his tale, nor your assent to any further proposals.—I

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light am going, Agnes, to one who can explain
at the these intricate circumstances.—Farewel!—
that I ask you not to remember me; but be not
ft.— too readily persuaded that it is your duty to
any forget me.”

ance, “ Sigismond,” replied Agnes, “ I won-
der at my own calmness—I cannot enter into
with your wild conjectures.—One thing is certain,
ent— Prince Rezzonico is my father, and it is my
or—it duty to obey him;—but you are going, you
s be- say—and at this hour, and thus discom-
a her posed?”

—she “ It is impossible now,” answered Sigis-
to dif- mond, “ to explain these occurrences to
d bro- you.—Do you know how I can escape?”

from “ Escape!” exclaimed Agnes, “ escape
ago- from the castle of your father, and against
unless his will!”

round “ This is no time for these questions,”
is no resumed Sigismond; “ my escape must be
true. immediate—my life is pursued!”

s tale, “ It cannot be from hence,” replied
als.—I Agnes, “ for this is an interior chamber;—
am but stay not, I beseech you, stay not here—

my agitated frame is incapable of supporting your presence."

"Agnes," answered the youth, with a forced composure, "you see I am calm—I say nothing to alarm you.—God forbid I should speak of my own internal feelings—it would be inhuman to you, Agnes;—but look up—we shall meet again——"

"In this world or the next!" interposed Agnes, and fell insensible on the couch.

To leave her in this situation was impossible—to stay was equally wrong; some one might enter her chamber, and finding him there, what dreadful consequences might ensue!

These considerations, which never occurred to him while the light of her gentle eye beamed upon him—while he heard the soft tones of her voice, now agonized his very soul while he beheld her lost in a temporary suspension of her misery. He raised her in his arms—he clasped her wildly to his bosom;—then the remembrance of Prince Rezzonico's dreadful tale rushed on his mind,

mind, and though his heart refused it full credence, yet he relinquished the still fainting Agnes, and regaining some recollection, he poured water on her face, and chafing her hands, at length saw her restored to a full consciousness of her situation.

“Leave me,” she exclaimed, “leave me, I beseech you—my attendant will soon be here, and—Oh Sigismond, leave me!”

“I will obey you, Agnes,” replied he, with incoherent voice and gesture; “yet tell me you will preserve inviolate the faith——”

“Spare me,” interrupted Agnes, “spare me on this dreadful subject.—Oh Sigismond! scarcely can I save myself from distraction.”

“Forgive me,” replied he, “I knew not what I said.—I am going—but whither Heaven only knows.—If we meet again, Agnes, it will be in happiness!”

Agnes sunk, overpowered, against the side of the couch, then suddenly starting, she exclaimed—

“ Ah Sigismond ! I had forgotten.—I have heard that through that door there is a way which leads to some caverns, that, after many windings and much toil, open on the woods beyond the limits of Voltorno.—My attendant’s fears are much fixed on that door, and it is through her I have learnt it. Endeavour to trace the windings, and you may regain your liberty.”

Sigismond, clasping his hands, ejaculated a fervent prayer for her welfare, and opening the door she mentioned, quitted her apartment, more dead than alive.

Agnes, with infinite presence of mind, arose from her couch, and after listening for a moment to the departing footsteps of Sigismond, refastened the door by which he had escaped, and returned to her comfortless bed. Her agitation had not suffered her to share the usual benefits which night and repose bring to the weary and distressed. Her apparel remained the same as when, the preceding day, she had been summoned to her father, and had learnt the horrible tale that
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for ever crushed her hopes.—On the wild conjectures that Sigismond had that night insinuated, she suffered not her fancy to dwell, conscious that they only served to dispel that composure she used her utmost endeavours to attain. She could not, however, help wondering how he had so easily obtained admission, since she had directed her attendant to fasten the door, and in the morning, at an early hour, to come again to the chamber.

A suspicion of treachery now crossed her mind, yet she was loth to suspect a girl whose simple and affectionate behaviour had inspired her with confidence ; this incident, however, though trivial in itself, yet alarmed her so much, that she determined to rely on herself alone for assistance and support ; and should the young girl shew ever so much attachment and affection for her, she determined not to be wrought upon by it, as the worst advantages might be made of her want of caution.

Her resolution was taken, firmly to withstand any proposals the Prince might make to her of altering her condition, since her present affection, though innocently culpable, was too strong to be wholly conquered, and either Pigliani or Valenti were hateful to her soul.—She resolved to seek in the arms of Religion the only true comfort that could heal wounds like her's, and to immure herself for life in a Convent.

She felt convinced that she should have many struggles with her father, who, in the little she had already seen of him, had shewn himself of a character that could ill brook the least contradiction; and he had already told her he destined her to be the bride of either Pigliani or Valenti.

“ Oh my mother !” exclaimed the suffering Agnes, “ how much do I owe to the mild, yet firm philosophy your lessons and examples ever inculcated, which has thus enabled me to weigh with calmness, and to decide with steadiness in a crisis of such trying emergency ;—may the same gentle resolution

lution nerve me to act worthily of thee, when I shall be called upon to exert more powers than even this period requires!—For him, of whom it is guilt to think, may I be allowed to pray, that he too may be sustained through this awful trial by powers superior to human nature—that he may be enabled to conquer the irritable and violent passions which naturally agitate his mind, and to submit with resignation to a fate as inevitable as it is dreadful!”

In reflections and ejaculations like these, Agnes passed the remainder of a sleepless night, and a bright and beautiful morning brought her attendant to her, whose compassionate and tender manners almost destroyed the superstructure of suspicion raised the preceding night. But Agnes was too truly miserable to want the consolations of such a being as her attendant;—the complicated feelings of her bosom could only be understood by intuition, and she suffered incessant sighs to heave her bosom, and unceasing tears to dim her eyes, without at-

tending to the persuasions or prayers of her woman.—At length, wearied with sollicitations to be comforted, which it was impossible could succeed, she requested to be left alone—at liberty to give way, without restraint, to the ebullitions of a sorrow, which, however it might leave her reason free to reflect and to determine, would have burst her heart, had it been denied the relief of tears and exclamations.

For some hours Agnes remained in solitude, and she began to hope she should be suffered to enjoy the melancholy consolation of loneliness without interruption; but she was mistaken. About noon, Laretta came with a summons from the Prince to attend him below.

Harassed and fatigued with watching and misery, Agnes desired her woman to return, and represent to the Prince how unable she was to obey him; and to request that he would allow her to remain where she was, till she was more fit to appear before him.

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“ No more of this whining.—On your obedience, I charge you to forget your impious affection for my son, and prepare yourself implicitly to obey a father who consults your welfare only in his commands. You must be sensible, Agnes, though you resolutely continue silent, that indulgence of a misplaced sorrow is equally vain and culpable.—Is it by brooding in secret over a passion which circumstances have rendered dreadful, that you hope to conquer it? or do you childishly prefer falling a victim to your ill-placed constancy, and bowing down the head of your father in sorrow to the

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grave?

grave?—Remember, Agnes, that the heart of your only parent is torn with double remorse :—the consciousness of his own errors is sufficient for him—make him not answerable for your obstinate ones ;—for that which is past, as it was involuntary, we will hope pardon may be easily obtained ; but if you persist in cherishing this vile attachment, will it not embitter every hour of your father's life, and shorten his existence ?—Shall not he be answerable for the fatal consequences of his own indiscretion ?—But if you resolve not to conquer your impious passion, recollect, Agnes, that you will point the dagger to the bosom of your father !”

Agnes shuddered with horror at an expostulation which, had it been delivered with tenderness, would have wrought most powerfully on her feelings ; but spoken with anger, with contempt, and indignation, it alarmed her fears without interesting her heart, and she besought her father to suffer her to speak.

“ Speak

“ Speak if thou wilt,” replied the Prince, “ but imagine not that thou canst change my determination.”

“ To speak of the unhappy attachment,” said Agnes, in a faltering voice, “ that has hitherto filled my bosom, will perhaps render my father indignant ; yet let him be assured that his daughter entertains too true a love of virtue and honour to suffer her to cherish it.—No, Signor, Agnes can be as resolute in the cause of virtue, as though she were not of a feeble sex ;—but she solicits you to suffer her to take her own methods of reconciling herself to the severe dispensations of Providence.”

“ I care not for the method,” replied Rezzonico, “ provided the end be what I wish.”

“ Accept,” answered Agnes, “ of my thanks for this concession, and suffer me to seek, in the bosom of Religion, that resignation which I can no where else attain.—Suffer me, I beseech you, to enter a Convent !”

“ There is no need of a Convent,” said the Prince, “ to assist your religion—you may be as pious as you will without quitting Voltorno, which you never will quit but as the wife of Pigliani or of Valenti.”

“ Alas ! my father,” resumed Agnes, “ it is to a conventual life I wish to devote myself.”

“ I will not hear of it,” interrupted Rezzonico, “ my word is passed—I will allow you a reasonable interval to indulge your grief, and Father Regolo shall attend you to assist your devotions ; but I expect that every day you join the society below, and that you will gradually familiarize yourself to prospects which would enliven any heart but so perverse a one as your’s.”

“ My father,” replied Agnes, “ indeed I am utterly unable to support myself in society.”

“ We shall see that,” said the Prince ; “ I insist on your making the trial.”

“ At least, Signor,” interposed Agnes, “ allow me a few days to——”

“ Not

“ Not an hour,” said the Prince ; “ and now, Agnes, that I have listened to you, hear me in your turn.—My will is not to be disputed—I shall conquer at last, and shall see you the wife of one or other of the Signors I have named to you.—What is to be done, therefore, had better be done quickly ; and shew the firmness and resolution you boast of by making one noble and effectual effort, which will avail you more towards quieting the emotions in your bosom, than months of weeping in your chamber, or of praying in a Convent.—Let it not be supposed that the daughter of Prince Rezonico can be in despair for such an accident as this—for an event which her own reason must tell her was the express disappointment of Providence, and in no way arose from the malignant intervention of man.—What method can be so effectual to banish one lover from your heart, as establishing another in his place ?—Offer no further answers—I will hear no more.—I have announced my will—it now only remains that you obey it.—I shall
expect

expect you in an hour ;” and with these words the Prince departed, leaving his daughter in an agony of grief, that for a short interval allowed not her reason to exert itself. After a few minutes, however, she recollected that exertion was now indeed necessary ; the Prince would be obeyed, and she had no time to lose. Sullenness or despair would do nothing with him ; but she felt a kind of gloomy pleasure as she reflected that the violence of the effort she was now obliged to make, would probably be too much for her enfeebled frame, and that, ere long, a final period would be put to her sorrows. With a forced desperation, therefore, she resolved to meet her fate.—Happiness and she had parted to meet no more ; and what became of her during the short remainder of her wretched life, she persuaded herself was wholly immaterial.

Yet ere she prepared to join the party below, a circumstance recurred to her mind that seemed to give her something like hope. Jachimo was her friend—with Jachimo, on her

her first arrival, she had had no opportunity of conversing, and the events of the last four-and twenty hours had totally driven him from her remembrance ; his promise of unfolding to her some circumstances relative, as she supposed, to her mother, now recurred to her mind with double force ; and the declaration of the Prince, that her mother and himself were connected by no ties but those of love, confirmed her in the idea that Jachimo had really been concerned in precipitating the fate of that unhappy parent. Yet his awakened conscience had made him her friend, and situated as she was, a friend might be invaluable. Feeling her heart recoil most forcibly from an union with either of the Signors her father had selected, she thought it not improbable that she might avail herself of the attachment of Jachimo to effect her escape from Voltorno, and to place her in a Convent ; and she doubted not but the tale she could tell, would induce the Superiors to give her the white veil immediately, and then it would
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be beyond the Prince's power to withdraw her from the asylum she had chosen. She resolved, therefore, to dissemble, as well as she could, the acuteness of her feelings, hoping by this means to elude the vigilance of her father, and obtain a private interview with Jachimo, who might also be able to tell her some particulars respecting the birth of Sigismond. Still she could not prevent the insinuated conjectures of that unhappy youth, that all might not be precisely as the Prince had stated it, from disturbing her mind with something like a flutter of hope; though she checked the intruder with all her powers, sensible that to have it cruelly blasted, would double even her present sufferings.—Conscious that, now this idea had again presented itself to her, she must not continue to ruminate in solitude, she summoned all her resolution, and rather before the appointed time went down to the parlour.

She found the whole party assembled, of whom she had yet seen only Pigliani, her conductor; he was the foremost to hasten
to

to support her trembling frame, while the most exquisite pleasure lightened in his expressive and beautiful features ;—the countenance of the Prince declared his approbation of her conduct, and he himself arose, and presented each of his guests to her with distinguishing kindness.

Overcome with the exertion she had made, she sunk into a chair, and Pigliani assiduously endeavoured to recal her wandering spirits. The circumstances of his acquaintance with her gave him a right to address her in a softened voice, and with an air of interest which highly offended the impetuous Valenti.

It was not difficult to discover, even had not their names been announced, which were the intended candidates for her favour. Pigliani, gentle, attentive, and insinuating, seemed secure of the prize, and careless of his rival ; while Valenti, hot-headed, furious, and impetuous, appeared determined to snatch the victory from his competitor, and was equally inattentive to the will of
Agnes,

Agnes, or the very evident preference the Prince gave to Pigliani.

If the soul of Agnes sickened at the tender attentions of Pigliani, she shuddered at the unceasing gaze and unqualified admiration of Valenti, whom his father, the Count Ubaldo, in vain strove to check; he avowed his pride in the contest for the hand of the Lady Agnes, and declared the struggle more glorious than that at Olympus, where heroes contended, and nations adjudged the prize. Even the Prince compassionated the feelings of his daughter, and strove to relieve her from this troublesome admirer.

The Signor Vitalba, who had long observed her with profound and undeviating attention, now approached her, and sought to engage her in conversation;—his manner apparently free from design, his age equal to that of her father, the gentleness of his voice, and the serious style of his conversation, induced Agnes to listen to him with less disgust than to either of her young lovers.

Valenti

Valenti beheld the approach of Vitalba without emotion, but Pigliani was visibly disconcerted at it ; he fixed a steady eye on the very inexplicable countenance of Vitalba, which preserved the same unchanging placidity in his discourse with the lovely and interesting Agnes, as ever distinguished it in his conferences with the Signors ; though these often turned on subjects which called forth all the eager passions, all the impetuous emotions of his companions.—As Agnes listened with more complacency to this new friend, Pigliani's countenance blackened with jealousy and anger ; while Valenti seemed coolly to laugh at him for feeling any apprehension of such a competitor. This painful situation continued till they were summoned to the social board ;—Agnes would most willingly have retired, but was not permitted, and being led by Vitalba to an upper seat, was constrained to remain during the repast.

As she viewed the various countenances around her, she recollected the supper at
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the table of the banditti, and thought she could read as ferocious characteristics in the faces of many of her present associates.

“ Alas ! ” thought she to herself, “ that evening, while it yet existed, I thought myself nearly as miserable as it was possible I could be—and now, how gladly would I exchange my present hopeless situation for a period when despair did not so wholly possess my bosom.—Nothing now can help me—nothing can ever again give me a gleam of happiness.—I then thought it not impossible but future events might concur to put me in possession of all my wishes ;—now I turn from such a possibility in wild despair, nor have I even a hope of peace but in the grave, where only such wretches as myself can forget their sorrows.”

Lost in these mournful reflections, involuntary tears started to her eyes, and she was endeavouring to restrain a weakness she was conscious would offend her father, heedless of what passed around her, when a sudden tumult at the table caught her

her attention. She looked up, and beheld the features of her father convulsed with rage as he spoke to an attendant beside him.

“ Why knew I not this before ? ” exclaimed the Prince, in a voice of thunder ; “ why was I not informed when first you discovered it ? ”

“ My Lord,” replied the trembling menial, “ we feared to inform you while we had any hopes of recovering the fugitive ; but every outlet has been carefully watched, in vain.”

“ Ye knew not the outlets,” vociferated the Prince ; “ but ye shall suffer for this.— Here, Benedetto, take these fellows, and confine them till you know my pleasure ;— but mind, if they escape you, your life shall pay the forfeit.”

Agnes listened, and trusted that it was of Sigismond they spoke, who had then she hoped effected his escape. She knew not what advantage he proposed to himself or her from the enquiries he was gone to make,
but

but, at any rate he was free, and she tried to rejoice that she was no longer in danger of beholding a being whose sorrows she was less equal to support than her own.

The Prince, who had dismissed his attendants, now cast his eyes on the enquiring countenance of Agnes; and wishing to discuss with his friends the unexpected flight of Sigismond, he told her she might retire to her apartment, and when he again wanted her, he would summon her to his presence. Agnes obeyed with readiness; and as she was crossing the great-hall to gain the staircase that led to her apartment, she saw her friend Jachimo making signs as if he wished to speak to her. Looking round, and seeing that she was alone, he ventured to approach.

“Lady,” said he, in a low voice, “when can I impart to you the circumstances I promised to relate?”

“Alas!” said Agnes, “I know not—I am closely watched, nor dare I trust Lauretta.”

“Many

"Many things," resumed Jachimo, "make me wish to repose this confidence in you, Lady;—I wish you could fix an hour."

"Where is Laretta now?" said Agnes.

"She is now below with the family," replied Jachimo; "but she will not stay long."

"I fear she is a kind of spy on me," replied Agnes; "but if you will wait for me, Jachimo——"

"At any place and hour you will fix, Lady; I will not fail——"

"Stay," said Agnes, recollecting herself, "to-morrow morning, with the early dawn, I will walk on the terrace."

"We should there be liable to observation," said Jachimo; "besides, the Prince goes to the chace to-morrow, and I am to attend him."

"Well then," said Agnes, "after the family are all retired to rest, I will meet you in this hall—I can easily reach it from my chamber without any disturbance."

“To-night then,” said Jachimo, and bowing respectfully, he retired, and Agnes sought her own apartment. The late events so cruelly important, had almost driven from her memory the promised communication of Jachimo; but now he had recalled it to her mind, her former wish to learn the particulars of her mother’s story recurred forcibly. She reached her chamber, where Lauretta soon appeared; and, lost in the variety of her reflections, Agnes paid but little attention to the girl’s talk, till at length a word struck her, and she said—

“What was that, Lauretta?”

“Only, Madam, I was saying it was very strange how the young Signor could contrive to escape; only nothing is strange in this old castle.”

“What young Signor?” enquired Agnes, willing to be satisfied if Sigismond had really regained his liberty; “and why had he been confined?”

“Nay, Madam,” replied Lauretta, “he was not confined—that is to say, not like a prisoner;

prisoner ; but my Lord the Prince had desired him to stay in his own room awhile for some reasons, and in the middle of the night Spigno and Federico found his room empty, and the doors of all the haunted rooms thrown open."

"What business had Spigno and Federico in his room in the middle of the night?" asked Agnes.

"Why, Madam, my Lord the Prince sent them to him with a message ; but they were so terrified to find all the haunted rooms open——"

"What tale is this of haunted rooms?" said Agnes, striving to dissemble her more acute feelings.

"Lord, Madam, have you never heard that that whole side of the castle is haunted? Why that's the reason it is shut up, and nobody never goes into it, only lately this young Signor Sigismond has slept in the last room of the suite ; but who would have thought of finding all the doors thrown
E 2 open?

open?—To be sure the ghosts have flown away with him!”

“Very likely,” said Agnes, trembling with agitation.

“Aye, Madam, no wonder you are so frightened.—Lord, Madam, why one night Federico, going in to make up the fire for the young Signor, could not see him, but saw the next room open, and a ghost all in armour, brandishing a sword, and such a blaze of light round him;—but do not mention this, Madam, for Federico never told nobody but me; for he says my Lord the Prince is always so angry to be told of the ghosts—and now he won’t believe that they have run away with the Signor Sigismond.”

“And do you believe it, Lauretta?” said Agnes.

“Oh yes, Madam, that I do,” replied Lauretta; “why where else should he be gone? for Spigno sent all the servants in the castle this way and that way to watch all the entrances, but they never see him go out at never a one of them; and to be sure
the

the ghosts have taken him for his wickedness, in daring to be in love with his own sister."

At these words, thus openly uttered, Agnes fell into successive fainting fits, in which she continued some time, until her scattered senses were roused by the indignant voice of Prince Rezzonico near the door of her chamber; he opened it, and with fury flashing in his eyes, exclaimed—

"Where is this unworthy daughter, who conspires against a father that consults her happiness alone in all he does?"

Agnes, amazed, demanded what she had done.

"That pretended innocence," replied the Prince, "will not impose on me.—It is known that you must have assisted your unworthy brother to escape, since there is but one outlet that has not been carefully watched."

A moment sufficed to nerve the soul of Agnes to a degree of firmness she little suspected herself of possessing, and she was

going to speak, when the Prince again exclaimed—

“ But perhaps he is even now bewildered in the intricate windings of the passages—I will go myself, and examine the labyrinth ; and in the meanwhile, Carucci, guard you with care this traitorous daughter !”

The Prince then ordered his attendants to bring torches, and unfolding the door through which Sigismond had fled, left the Monk in the apartment with Agnes.—Carucci endeavoured to harangue the Lady Agnes on the peculiar circumstances of her situation, but she was incapable of even feigning attention, and besought him to desist. To silence him, however, was impossible, and he reasoned with her on the impropriety of counteracting her father's will, by her wishes to go into a cloister.—She must be convinced, he said, that it was necessary to sacrifice her impious passion ; and as the struggle must either way be equally severe, it behoved her to fulfil at least one duty, and obey the commands of her parent—she would then have the com-
fort

fort of reflecting that by such conduct his blessing would attend her through life.

Oppressed with inexplicable anxiety, Agnes lost every word of the holy Father's discourse; and trembling with fear lest the Prince's suggestion should be true, and Sigismond should still be wandering among the windings of the labyrinth, she kept her eyes fixed on the eventful door, and waited with a racking impatience the return of her father. Minutes seemed as hours while so important an event hung on their issue, and she traversed her chamber in an agony of mind the presence of Carucci was unable to repress. Again he preached patience and resignation—again set before her the magnificence, the rank, the wealth, and, as he argued it, the happiness that awaited her compliance with the will of her father;—but counsel so misapplied and so ill-timed, seemed only to madden her brain; and she replied, with some asperity—

“ I beseech you, Father, spare yourself this trouble; my mind is not now in a frame

to profit by your endeavours—time may perhaps soften the violence of my feelings, but——”

“ I am sorry, Lady Agnes,” replied Carucci, “ to see you so contumacious in refusing to listen to the soothing of piety and philosophy ;—you discover a temper I did not expect from so gentle a countenance, and, I must say, a disposition wholly inconsistent with your wish for a monastic life.—Do you think you would there be exempt from remonstrances to which you listen with so much impatience?—The voice of Religion and Judgment is every where the same ; and the greatest advocates for conventual seclusion would, were they to hear all the particulars of the case, allow my arguments to be just.”

To this harangue, Agnes had not appeared even to listen ; anxious only for the return of the Prince, a thousand dreadful ideas rushed on her mind.—Sigismond had told her that his life was sought, and the rage of the Prince on his evasion, seemed to corroborate

borate the assertion, and also to give something like stability to the conjectures Sigismond had attempted to insinuate, that all was not precisely as she had been informed. Why, if the youth were really the son of Rezzonico, why was he so eager to keep him confined?—With what views had those two men visited his chamber in the dead of night?—Could a father be accessory to the murder of his own son?—Was it not rather some one whose rights interfered with his own, whom he wished to destroy?—Yet she strove to check these horrible suggestions, by the remembrance that Rezzonico was really her father; of that she could not entertain a doubt. Yet another horrible idea, in spite of her endeavours, would flash on her mind:—Should the Prince meet with the wretched youth still wandering in those intricate paths, what should prevent him from now, this very moment, accomplishing his dreadful will, and for ever annihilating the claims of Sigismond? Those two men who attended him, were the same

that had announced to him the escape of the youth, and probably the very Federico and Spigno mentioned by Lauretta—they had the countenances of murderers!—Perhaps at that very moment they were plunging their daggers into the bosom of their victim—perhaps leaving him, mangled but yet surviving, to end his existence in those gloomy vaults!—The idea was too dreadful—she sickened, turned pale, and fainted;—but a few moments, however, elapsed ere she recovered the full consciousness of her situation, and in another quarter of an hour, she heard the returning footsteps of Rezzonico. She strove to summon all her fortitude to meet what she had to endure, and eagerly watched the appearance of the Prince and his followers.

The door opened, and she beheld three countenances, pale, wrathful, yet, as she feared, with a gleam of malicious satisfaction on every feature;—strongly illumined by the glare of the torches, she thought the countenance of the Prince the most ferocious

she had ever seen ; she thought she read in it that he was just returned from destroying his fellow-creature—perhaps his son!—The drawn daggers they each carried, added to their terrifying appearance ; and when they were within the room, and the door carefully guarded, Rezzonico gazed on the face of his daughter, and demanded in a voice of stifled rage, what punishment that daughter merited who rebelled against her father's known will ? adding, he supposed she meditated her own escape next.

Agnes, with an undaunted air, enquired if he had found him whom he sought ?

“ Of this at least be certain,” replied the Prince, in a voice of thunder, “ you will see your minion no more—I will at any hazard guard you from the perpetration of the foul crime you meditate.”

“ It is,” said Agnes, “ my most fervent wish to see that unhappy youth no more.—You wrong me, Signor, by your suspicions.”

“ Did he not escape through your apartment ?” exclaimed the Prince.

“ He did, my Lord,” replied Agnes.

“ And how came he, and with what view came he into your apartment ?” asked Rezzonico, with a look a fiend might have gloried in.

“ Let me rather ask,” said Agnes, with all the firmness of conscious innocence, “ from what destiny he sought to fly ?”

A momentary paleness crossed the cheek of Rezzonico, but it was succeeded by a flush of double indignation.

“ Utter not another word,” exclaimed the Prince, “ but learn in solitude and silence to repent those already spoken.—I will not remove you from this chamber, because the avenue to escape will but tantalize you with the impossibility of availing yourself of it ;—but light and society you enjoy no more till you come forth the voluntary wife of Signor Pigliani, if, after this conduct, he still deems you worthy of his love.”

Then

Then again examining the fastenings of the door, he ordered the windows to be so closed as to exclude even the fading twilight, which was now spreading over the face of the earth ; and taking even Lauretta away, left his wretched daughter in total solitude and darkness.—External objects, however, could little affect a mind so wholly occupied with more important concerns, and Agnes was scarcely sensible of the deprivation of light ; yet when she reflected that in the long hours of night that were approaching, she might have explored those passages, and satisfied herself that Sigismond had really escaped, she lamented the loss of what alone could have assisted her in so arduous an undertaking.

“ Yet,” said she, “ to what end do I wish the escape and life of that unhappy young man ?—To live, is desirable only when we may hope with life to enjoy happiness—but that is for ever out of his reach ; and at this early age, he dies innocent and virtuous, for Heaven is too merciful to impute

pute to him the involuntary crime of loving me.—These events are beyond my power to controul; I must therefore submit to my fate with resignation, if my prayers will enable me to attain it.—Forgive me, Heaven, the foul suspicions I have conceived of some whom it is my duty to respect; and forgive me the wish that the same murderous intentions may extend to me also!”

In reflections such as these Agnes passed the melancholy hours.—The evening was not far advanced, and she could not hope for the relief of sleep in the agitated state of her mind. Day and night were henceforward to be the same to her; for she felt that her confinement would end only with her life, if the term of it depended on her voluntary union with Pigliani.

CHAP. IV.

“ Is it not now the hour,
“ The holy hour, when to the cloudless height
“ Of yon starr'd concave climbs the full orb'd moon,
“ And to this nether world, in solemn stillness,
“ Gives sign that to the listening ear of Heaven
“ Religion's voice should plead?—The very babe
“ Knows this—and, chance awaked, his little hands
“ Lifts to the Gods, and on his innocent couch
“ Calls down a blessing.”

MASON'S CARACTACUS.

DISMALLY did the Lady Agnes pass the succeeding hours as she heard them announced by the tolling of the castle clock: yet she wished not for day, for day would bring with it fresh persecutions; and if she could

could but have persuaded herself that Sigismond was not now writhing under wounds inflicted by the hands of his father's emissaries, she would have endeavoured to reconcile herself to her present situation.

Eleven, twelve passed heavily on, and the falling to of the great doors of the different apartments below, seemed to announce that the inmates of the castle were retiring to rest. And now not a sound was heard; Lauretta's ideas of the castle being haunted by unquiet spirits, returned upon her mind, and she felt the power of solitude and darkness, added to the consciousness that it was night, operate upon a mind not habitually timid. She recalled the conference she had once held with him who was now lost to her for ever, on the re-appearance of departed spirits; and she remembered his idea, that they would only be suffered to appear on an occasion really important—to prevent, or to punish vice—to encourage, or reward virtue. Important events seemed now hourly occurring; but she saw not how any supernatural inter-

interference could hasten or retard them, at least with respect to herself: she therefore strove to dismiss fears so unavailing, and tried to fix her mind on the promised communication of Jachimo, who was probably even then waiting for her in the great hall. She pitied his needless trouble, and wished it had been possible to apprise him of her confinement—though recollecting that that had probably been done by Lauretta, she hoped he was not there expecting her. But all her endeavours to fix her thoughts on what he had to disclose were unavailing; fears indefinable took possession of her feelings, and she expected to see shadowy forms flitting along the profound obscurity of her chamber—a thousand times she imagined she heard sighs and low groans, and more than once she started on fancying some being rushed past her, whose wings rustled in the air.

She threw herself on her couch, but to slumber was impossible. At length her real sufferings chased these ideal fears, and, over-
powered

powered with the consciousness of hopeless misery, she wept and sighed in bitterness of soul; then seeking from religion that composure so difficult to attain, she threw herself on her knees, and spent some time in earnest prayer. After this, finding her spirits calmer, she laid down on the couch, and at length fell into an unquiet slumber; the ideas that had possessed her waking, haunted her sleep, and she fancied herself in the great hall, listening to Jachimo's promised tale:— suddenly he declared it necessary, in order to confirm the truth of what he was relating, to lead her into some of the deserted apartments of the castle; and in her way thither she stumbled over something, and fell to the ground. As her hands touched what had caused her fall, she perceived it was a human body, and examining it by the light of Jachimo's torch, she discovered the features of Sigismond; then looking up in Jachimo's face, he was changed to Prince Rezzonico, who sharply upbraiding her for the concern she discovered, told her that he had murdered

dered Sigismond with his own hand, to save her from the dreadful effects of her guilty passion. She was then snatched from the spot, and found herself in one of the ruined rooms, which was wholly dark; but she was informed by Jachimo, who was again her companion, where she was.—In a moment the room became illuminated; and looking round to discover the cause, she beheld in a strong light a martial figure, clad in complete armour, who turned on her a mournful countenance, and said, in a low voice—“Unhappy child, thou sufferest for thy parent’s fault!” and instantly vanished.—As she was returning, she met again her father in the winding passage where she had stumbled over the body of Sigismond, and he, with a ferocious countenance, seized her by the hair, and exclaimed—“For your sake I have murdered Sigismond; now obey me—this instant give your hand to Pigliani, or I plunge this dagger in your bosom!”—She had just strength to exclaim—“Strike!”—when she suddenly awoke in extreme agitation,

tion, and fearing to dream again, arose and slowly traversed the room ; but the recollection of the horrible circumstances of the vision overpowered her, and she trembled in agony.—She feared lest her fancies were prophetic, and Sigismond was indeed murdered by the hand of his father. So long and so earnestly did she dwell on this idea, that she almost expected his spirit would come and announce to her its deliverance from the troubles that had so long and so cruelly oppressed him.

While she thus ruminated and watched, she heard a species of low murmuring noise beyond the very door through which Sigismond had escaped. Her fancy soon transformed this noise into the groans of a dying person, and she now believed that the youth, not wholly murdered by the remorseless hand of the Prince, had dragged his limbs back to the entrance of her chamber, there to breathe his last sigh ! She placed herself close to the door, and listened earnestly, but could hear nothing distinctly ; and after a while

while all was silent.—In an agony of distress that she could not examine more narrowly into this singular circumstance, she endeavoured to withdraw the bolts of the door, but they resisted every attempt of her feeble and trembling fingers ; she formed the project of making her voice heard, but this idea she instantly relinquished, reflecting that she was wholly uncertain who might be beyond that door ; ruffians might have entered those passages for the worst of purposes, and she might expose herself to the most dreadful fate if she discovered herself to them. Fears of every varied kind assailed her, and while she yet lingered and listened at the door, the castle-clock struck two.

“ How slow the hours pass with the wretched,” thought Agnes, “ and how many have I yet to wait, ere any one will approach to break this dreadful solitude ! ”

Again she listened for sounds, but none met her ear, save the murmuring of the wind, which sighed at intervals through the winding passages of the castle.—Her fancy

was in so irritable a state, that it often transformed the whistling of the gulf into the cry of a spirit; and finding herself relapse into a degree of horror and anguish almost insupportable to human reason, she again had recourse to prayer.

While she was yet on her knees, her room was suddenly and momentarily illuminated—she started up, expecting to see some terrific figure who might appal her very soul, and recommending herself to Heaven, looked anxiously round.—A horrible crash of thunder instantly convinced her what it was that had so alarmingly enlightened her chamber; the rain poured down in torrents, the wind roared almost as loud as the thunder, which rolled in such repeated and dreadful peals that she thought, even among the Alps, she had never experienced so severe a storm. The echo from hill to hill reverberating every crash, made the thunder sound incessant, and the vivid lightning flashed horribly through the crevices of her shutters.

Agnes

Agnes stood aghast in the midst of her apartment, listening to the dreadful war of elements, when a nearer noise alarmed her still more : something like the clanking fall of armour stunned her, and seemed to be in her very room.—After a moment's thought, she concluded that it must be the picture of her father, loosened from the hook which had supported it, and fallen to the ground.

Directing her steps by the sound to the spot, she found her conjecture right, and offered up her grateful thanks to that Being which had preserved her from so immediate a danger.

In an interval of the storm, however, she heard the noise in the secret passage renewed with more violence than ever ; she even fancied that some attack was making on the door into her room.

“ Yet,” said she, “ for what purpose should any one steal into my apartment by that concealed entrance, when I am here defenceless and unprotected ? And, if my life
be

be thirsted after, an easy and not unwilling sacrifice."

In a little while longer, it seemed to her that a part of the edifice had fallen; and, from the sound, she concluded that this had occurred in the building beyond her room. The noise was tremendous, and in a few minutes all the inhabitants of the castle were roused. She heard voices and footsteps, but none approached her door; and she welcomed with a kind of gloomy despair the idea that she should be left to perish among the ruins of the edifice. While she yet indulged this horrible suggestion, the outer-door of her chamber was unlocked, and Pigliani rushed in.

"Fairest Agnes," said he, "allow me to save you?—The castle totters to its foundation, and the ruin is already begun in the outworks beyond your apartment!"—And advancing to her, he took her hand, and would have led her forth; but her feet refused to move; she apprehended she knew
not

not what of treachery or design, and she said—

“ Signor, I am a prisoner here by my father’s orders.”

Pigliani said no longer to listen, but clasping her in his arms, bore her away from a part of the castle which seemed doomed first to be destroyed.—Her spirits wholly overcome, Agnes could only exclaim—

“ Is the Prince safe?—Carry me to my father.”

“ Every one is safe, Lady,” replied Pigliani, “ and I will conduct you wherever you demand.”

As he bore along his almost fainting prize, however, he could not forbear pressing her with ardent tenderness to his bosom, nor imprinting on her pallid cheek a kiss so vehement, that it roused Agnes from her state of debility, and she insisted on being released. The humility of his contrition might have atoned for his offence, could he have been in the eyes of Agnes any thing but an object

of disgust, and she walked haughtily onward.

“Where is the Prince, Signor?” said she.

“In the great hall below,” replied Pigliani, “to which I mean instantly to conduct you; but let me first obtain your pardon.”

“You do not mean to detain me here, Signor,” resumed Agnes, “till I have pronounced it?”

Awed by the dignity of her manner, Pigliani again moved forward. They were now very near the hall, when he again turned, and bent his knee to Agnes.

“Once more, loveliest Agnes, let me implore you to forgive a fault caused only by an uncontrollable passion.—Oh Agnes! give me but a hope that in the decision, which will soon rest with you, I shall be more favoured than Valenti.”

“Signor,” said Agnes, “there is one way by which you might secure my eternal gratitude, and more you must be convinced is

not, nor will be, in the power of this broken heart to bestow."

"You may command me to do any thing," replied Pigliani, still kneeling, "but to relinquish you."

"Then I have done," replied Agnes, "I have no more, Sir, to say—lead me to my father."

"Fairest Agnes," resumed Pigliani, covering her hand with kisses, "I cannot now fully explain myself; but remember, that though choice will be permitted you, absolute refusal will not.—Mine or Valenti's you must be—I only beg to be of the two the least hateful to you.—Did it rest with me to give you full and entire liberty, should you, could you sue in vain?—No, I would doom myself to misery rather than accept so very reluctant a hand;—but this is not mine to give—all that is in my power, I solemnly swear to do; and, from the moment I have received your faith at the altar, I will leave you perfect mistress of yourself, and trust to
F 2 time,

time, and my tender affection, to win from you some return of sensibility."

A loud clap of thunder at that moment startled Agnes, and she besought him to suffer her to seek her father; for with one hand he was grasping both her's, while his other arm encircled her slender waist, and was gradually drawing her closer to him; yet with an air so respectful, that it appeared as if his energy were forced from him against his will by the ardour of his feelings.

"Heaven," resumed he, "in that awful sound, attests my truth, and ratifies my oath. Speak, gentlest Agnes—I ask but for preference over Valenti.—I know that to your wounded bosom both must be hateful;—but trust, I beseech you, to my promises.—You will find Valenti more impetuous and uncontrollable.—Speak, dearest Agnes, one word, one whisper, so low that no ear but that of love tender as mine should catch it."

"Oh Signor!" replied Agnes, "desist I entreat you.—How can I promise preference
who

who know no wish but to die—who have no hope but to be released from anguish I am unequal to support.—Lead me, lead me to my father !”

The ghastly paleness of her countenance made Pigliani fear she would faint, and he obeyed her earnest request, whispering as he moved forward with her, while he forced her to lean on him, for indeed she was unable to support herself—

“ Yes, lovely arbitress of my fate, I will obey you without reserve, without further requesting a promise that would give me all I can taste of happiness.—I know I have no chance of touching your heart—your friendship was all I asked.”

He now opened a door, and led the half-fainting Agnes into the large hall, where all the Signors were assembled, except Vitalba—a circumstance to which they all seemed inattentive, though Agnes instantly remarked it.—The Prince observed her languid countenance, and offered her wine to recruit her exhausted frame, while he gave the most liberal praise to

Pigliani for his ready exertions for the Lady Agnes. Valenti, bursting with envy, heard these praises, and his countenance scowled gloomy defiance at his rival; nor could Agnes deny to her own heart that there could be no competition between the two Signors.

Valenti, hot-headed, violent, and unguarded, betrayed every symptom of the worst disposition: his countenance was artful, though his impetuous youth now made him unguarded; but his eye proved him capable of every exertion of malice, and of the most unabating revenge; his manners, rude and unpolished, spoke him at once savage and untaught;—while Pigliani joined to a beautiful face and graceful person, the charm of the most elegant manners, the most uniform urbanity; tender and respectful, he felt and practised the delicacies of love, and the generosity of his promises proved him to have some soul to have been capable even of imagining such concessions.—It was evident too, to which of the candidates the Prince most
leaned,

leaned, if that circumstance could have had any weight in determining so important a choice.

Ere Agnes had been long in the hall, Signor Vitalba entered : his countenance betrayed disappointment, and but little notice was paid to his appearance. The Signors were all drowning in wine the remembrance of the terrors that had driven them from their beds, and Agnes saw with disgust that the Priest, Regolo Carucci, had nothing of the Priest but the habit ; that he gave into the same excesses, and indulged the same intemperate gaiety as the others.—Pigliani, as he passed her, whispered to her that he would not now distress her with conversation, and joined the gentlemen, frequently, however, regarding her with eyes of mingled pity, respect, and tenderness ; nor could she help observing how much more refined were his manners and gaiety than those of his companions.

CHAP. V.

“ The deep-ton’d thunder roars,
“ And scaring lightnings fly !
“ The angry spirit of the lake
“ Dashes his dark blue waves
“ And rides in foam !”

SAYER.

WHILE the Lady Agnes remained in a situation of so much constraint, it was her wish to have kept apart from any of her companions, and she felt thankful for the forbearance of Pigliani, and for the delicate address with which he contrived to prevent Valenti from approaching her; and saved from these two, she listened with less reluctance

luciance to the serious and unassuming conversation of Signor Vitalba, who placed himself near her, and sought to lead her attention from the subjects that so mournfully engrossed it. He spoke on topics of sentiment, of literature, of feeling; and Agnes, who felt it her duty to detach her mind as much as possible from Sigismond, listened with complaisance, and strove to interest herself in a conversation so suitable to her general habits; nor did she immediately perceive that Valenti chose to resent, in a very unbecoming manner, the conduct of Pigliani, till high words at the table attracted her notice. She saw the youth bursting with passion, accusing Pigliani of employing unfair and ungentlemanlike artifices to win the affections of the lady, while he restrained him from availing himself of open and honourable opportunities; concluding with an oblique hint that the contest between them had better be decided by the sword, which would quickly shew who best merited to obtain the prize.

“ I measure not all merit,” returned Pigliani, disdainfully, “ by a brutal courage which dares face danger and death.—Nevertheless, Signor, I do not object to measuring swords with you, except on the grounds that the lady has a right to declare her preference, and that the issue of a combat might chance to deprive her of him least odious to her.”

Valenti began, in a ferocious tone of voice, an answer which would probably have robbed his adversary of his self-command; but that the Prince interposed, in a voice which instantly imposed forbearance on the disputants.

“ No more of this !” exclaimed he ; “ this hour shall put an end to debates which have too long disturbed the peace of my society. Agnes is present, and shall immediately announce her choice, to which I expect both will submit without a murmur.—Agnes, come hither !”

Trembling and overwhelmed, Agnes arose from her seat, but her tottering limbs

ful

fused to support her, and she sunk down again in extreme agitation ; she made, however, another and a more successful effort to rise, but she was wholly unable to approach her father,

“ What childish weakness is this ? ” said the Prince ; “ but no matter, you can hear me there. There is not much to be said, for you are not now to learn, Agnes, that it is necessary to make a strong and resolute effort to conquer the unfortunate attachment you formed in ignorance of your real situation ; and painful as I feel it must be to you, yet, my child, the consciousness that you are fulfilling the first of your duties—obedience to your father, will support you through the trial. Nor do I condemn you to a miserable lot—I give you your choice of two men, either of whom the fairest and noblest lady might be proud to accept.—You are fair and noble, Agnes—but your heart is not disengaged ; yet are these two cavaliers willing to overlook this capital objection, and to abide by your decision.—

Speak then—no offence shall be taken by the rejected candidate; and remember that it is easier to make one violent effort which shall completely effect your purpose, than to work gradually for years to undermine the ill-placed edifice of your former affection.”

“ Pardon me, Sir,” replied Agnes, “ if I declare that the heart of your daughter is free, absolutely free from any improper attachment; but at the same time it is for ever dead to all feelings of love. As far as respects myself, therefore, no good end will be answered by so terrible an exertion; and with respect to the gentlemen, it is impossible a being, heartless and soulless as I am, can in any way contribute to their happiness.”

“ I have heard you, Agnes,” replied the Prince, “ with the utmost patience and attention, and now I repeat my positive command that you this moment make your election. Father Regolo shall instantly unite you to the man of your choice; and all murmurs, all regrets shall be for ever at
an

an end.—Speak, Agnes—make your choice. Nay, never hesitate—I am resolute, and this hour shall behold you the wife of one or other of these cavaliers.”

“Impossible!” exclaimed Agnes, and sunk insensible on the couch.

“These artifices shall not avail,” thundered the Prince, and roughly pulling her from the seat, sprinkled water over her, and swore with many violent oaths that she should obey him.

Slowly recovering from a state she wished to have continued in for ever, Agnes said, in a mournful voice—

“I wish I could obey you, my Lord.”

“Could,” reiterated he, “you shall obey me!—I ask but one word—Pigliani or Valenti?—but by all that’s sacred, you go not hence unmarried!”

Here a low moaning noise caught their ears, and they were all for a time silenced. The Prince was the first who recovered from the surprise this circumstance occasioned, and he recovered only to reiterate his orders

to

to Agnes, who, pale and affrighted, sunk in another fainting fit at his feet.—Signor Pigliani now stepped forward, and besought the Prince to spare her for the present, unequal as she evidently was to support his vehemence; and Vitalba joined with an earnestness of supplication which at length prevailed with Rezzonico to postpone, till the morrow, the choice he had determined should be decided that night: and when the wretched girl again opened her eyes, and eagerly sought again to close them in that insensibility which alone afforded her a respite from persecution, her two intercessors approached her, and hastily informed her that she should undergo no farther trouble.

“But till to-morrow only,” exclaimed the Prince, “will I delay the conclusion of a circumstance that has occasioned me so much vexation.—Retire to your chamber,” added he, addressing his daughter, “the storm is over, and there is no more to fear;—but remember, I will allow of no further trifling; to-morrow you must announce your election,

or

or the liberty of chusing will be refused you, and some other method must be taken to decide the difference."

Agnes endeavoured to curtsy to her father as she rose to leave the room; but her enfeebled limbs would not support her, and Pigliani and Vitalba, who had retired to a small distance from her, flew at the same instant to assist her. Valenti stood sullenly aloof, scowling resentment and indignation. Agnes, thanking Pigliani with a grateful look, accepted the arm of Vitalba, and willingly withdrew from the presence of her father.

Signor Vitalba conducted her with the utmost tenderness across the great hall; but she was so much shaken by the perturbation she had had to endure, that she was again near fainting. He besought her to seat herself till she was a little recovered, and in a voice of sympathy enquired if there were any thing he could do to serve her, requesting she would tax his ability to the utmost.

"Alas,

“ Alas, Signor !” replied she, “ though I am most grateful for your offers of assistance, it seems impossible I can avail myself of them, since there appears no method of eluding the positive will of my father.—I have only deferred for a few hours the trial which yet must come, and how I shall support it I am unable to imagine.”

“ From me, Lady Agnes,” resumed Vitalba, “ you can have nothing to fear—will you put yourself for a time under my care?—I will convey you to a cloister, or to whatever place of refuge you shall deem respectable and inviolable ; from whence you may make conditions for your return to the rank and station you are so well fitted to adorn.”

“ What, Signor,” interposed Agnes, “ is it to quit my father’s house you mean?—to make conditions with my father!—Alas ! Signor Vitalba, I am indebted to your kind intentions ; but your feeling for my sorrows has led you to forget the limits of propriety.”

“ I

“ I admire,” replied Signor Vitalba, “ the delicacy of your sentiments, and acknowledge that my plan is not suited to a lady whose sense of decorum is so exquisite ;— but at least allow me to remonstrate with your father—to represent to him how necessary a certain portion of time is to reconcile you to the change in all your prospects, and to request for you an extension of the period ?”

“ If, Signor,” answered Agnes, “ your rhetoric could prevail on my father to suffer me to retire into a Convent, my utmost wishes would be gratified.—Of happiness on earth I have no hope, and what would so sweetly heal the wounds of my heart, as the balm of religious exercises ?”

“ To this project,” answered Vitalba, “ I fear there would be no chance of obtaining the Prince’s consent, as his ambition and his tenderness would both be so highly gratified in seeing you the heiress of his honours.”

“ But,

“ But, Signor,” said Agnes, “ can no other means be found of gratifying those feelings?—I am not—the—there is another——”

“ Dear Lady Agnes,” resumed Vitalba, in a softened tone, “ the estates and honours of Prince Rezzonico are sufficient to endow two noble families.—The cavaliers, one of whom he proposes to honour with your hand, are both of them men of sufficient birth and merit to grace the further rank to which this union would exalt them; and your father would have the satisfaction of attaching to himself a firm and affectionate friend, as well as of aggrandizing a man of merit in his son-in-law, and also of seeing the bulk of his estates descend in lineal succession.”

Notwithstanding the delicate promptness with which Signor Vitalba had seized her meaning with regard to Sigismond, the allusion to the circumstance agitated Agnes so much that she was obliged to break off the conference, and request to retire to her own
room,

room, to which Signor Vitalba conducted her with all possible tenderness of manner; and, having expressed her gratitude to him for his sympathy in her feelings, and his intended exertions in her favour, she closed her door, and threw herself on her couch. Here a violent agony of tears saved her from again fainting; and summoning all her resolution to her aid, she strove to arrange her plan of conduct for the arduous trial she was to undergo on the morrow; but notwithstanding her efforts, the more she contemplated her situation, the more her heart recoiled from the election she was called upon to make, and she almost repented having rejected Signor Vitalba's offer of withdrawing her from the violence of her father, and placing her in the sanctuary of a Convent.—She felt that filial duty was certainly one of the first duties imposed on every human being; and to her, through all the early part of her life, filial piety had gone hand in hand with inclination, and she had found no pleasure

pleasure so great as in obeying her amiable mother.

“ Yet very feeble,” thought Agnes, “ is that virtue that can only shine where it has no difficulties to encounter. It is now I am called upon to shew the strength of my principles—to prove I have that firmness within me which can withstand even a strong temptation to do wrong.—But alas !” continued she, “ how can I be sure that I am right ? Did not the whole conduct of my beloved mother prove that she was averse to leave me under the care of my surviving parent ?—Would she have felt an unfounded prejudice ?—And am I not, therefore, justified in eluding the orders of one whom it is plain she was unwilling to rely on ?”

Not long, however, could Agnes continue thus to reason with herself ; the agitation of her mind rendered her so ill, that the morning saw her unable to rise ; and the Prince could scarcely be restrained, even by her fever, from compelling her to declare her choice :—but the united solicitations of all
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the Signors, in which now even the impetuous Valenti joined, procured for the wretched victim of disease a respite of a few days.

Delirium and danger succeeded, and for some time the drooping Agnes hovered between life and death, unconscious of the relief that seemed to offer itself to her sorrows. When at length she began to recover, extreme debility had followed the fever and delirium, and Prince Rezzonico being told that her life was still in the utmost danger if her mind were suffered to be in the smallest degree agitated, condescended to pay her a visit, and to promise to refrain from every exaction that discomposed her, till she should again be perfectly able to discuss the particulars of her situation. She even flattered herself she saw in the stern countenance of the Prince symptoms of paternal tenderness, that led her to hope he might be prevailed on wholly to dispense with her obedience in this particular. This hope, added to her youth, and natural good constitution,

stitution, aided her recovery ; and Lauretta was permitted to talk to her, and try to amuse her.—Agnes enquired with interest into the occurrences below ;—she hoped that the cavaliers might have withdrawn their claims, convinced as they must be of her invincible repugnance ; but she found that they both continued at the castle, and that every thing remained in the same situation as before her illness.

“ Only,” added Lauretta, “ that there is a strange person here at present, who is not often seen, and who when he is seen, nobody knows ; nor can any body discover where he lodges, nor how he is supported.”

“ This is a strange history, Lauretta,” said Agnes, “ and has, I suppose, as much foundation as the tales of the ghosts you used to amuse me with.”

“ Nay, Signora,” replied Lauretta, “ you may laugh, but this is indeed true ;—all the servants have seen him, and he keeps his face concealed in a long wrapping cloak he wears, and they have endeavoured to tell
my

my Lord the Prince of him ; for old Benedetto says, he is sure it is the ghost of Ghiberti, a servant that my Lord the Prince spirited away, for being attached to the young gentleman that's escaped."

A pang struck deep to the heart of Agnes at these words ; but, dissembling her emotions, she said—

" What do you mean by being spirited away, Lauretta ?—If the Prince discharged Ghiberti from his service, and the poor man is since dead, that is no reason why his ghost should come here."

" Ah Madam !" said Lauretta, " Ghiberti was not merely discharged from my Lord the Prince's service. Every body is persuaded that he was either confined in some dungeon, or put to death."

" These are impertinent and improper conjectures, Lauretta," replied Agnes ; " your fellow-servants have no right to vent such opinions, and it is more faulty in you to report them to me.—If Ghiberti is imprisoned,

imprisoned, depend on it he committed some crime that deserved it."

"His crime, Signora," answered Lauretta, "every body said, was nothing more than being desirous to befriend that fine young gentleman that was kept in the haunted rooms; and I am sure, if that young Signor was son to my Lord the Prince, as people say he was, it was a shame to shut him up in those ruined apartments, with nothing but ghosts to keep him company.—Why, Signora, there's the Knight in black armour, that burns himself to ashes every Midsummer-night, and all the rest of the year is growing by degrees to a monstrous height, stalks about those rooms, clanking his armour, and groaning so terribly!"

Agnes suffered Lauretta to talk, in order to dissipate the perturbation she felt at every mention of Sigismond; nor could she judge whether Lauretta was simple or malicious by the manner of her conversation. At length, however,

however, interrupting her narrative, she said—

“ Probably this stranger, who occasionally visits the castle, is this same Knight in black armour.”

“ I am sure,” replied Laupetta, “ I wish then we could catch him, and we would burn him to ashes to some purpose.—But he lives in the castle, Madam, for the great gates have never been opened, and he could not creep through the walls, you know.”

“ Not unless he were indeed a ghost, Laupetta.”

“ Well, Signora, you may one day or other repent laughing at these things—there’s only one of them below that has ever dared to speak to this stranger, and that’s Jachimo.”

The name of Jachimo recalled a thousand remembrances to the heart of Agnes, and she determined to make an effort to see this man, who could tell her some particulars of those early sufferings of her mother, that

had gradually conducted her to an untimely grave, and she said—

“ I should be curious to question Jachimo about this strange being—could I speak to him, do you think, Lauretta ?”

“ Oh Lord, Madam !” answered Lauretta quickly, “ I do not think Jachimo would answer any questions you would put to him; for he is a very surly fellow.—I am sure we are none of us obliged to Signor Pigliani for bringing him home to the castle.—Now I think on’t,” added Lauretta, “ I’ll tell Signor Vitalba of this stranger—he’s the most courteous of all the Signors, and often speaks to me as he passes me, and I’ll certainly tell him myself.”

Wearied with a conversation from which she could gain nothing, Agnes expressed a wish to go into the air, and Lauretta proposed her walking on the ramparts; to this her mistress contented, and throwing her veil over her, she took Lauretta’s arm, and moved slowly towards the ramparts. She had hoped, in going down stairs, and cross-
ing

ing the great hall, to have had an opportunity of seeing Jachimo; but she found there was a door that opened on the ramparts from the corridor with which her room communicated.

The pure breath of heaven revived her enfeebled frame, and she hailed the beams of the sun with ardour and delight. As she came to the perforations in the wall, made for the purpose of mounting cannon in times of danger, she sent a longing look to the country beyond, where perhaps her Sigismond was now wandering a miserable desolate exile; but from this contemplation it was necessary to withdraw her mind, and she moved forwards slowly and feebly, when Lauretta called her attention to the court below.

“Look, Lady,” said she, “there is the very stranger I spoke of—and see, if Jachimo be not talking to him.”

Agnes looked, and beheld a man seemingly advanced in life, wrapped in a dark coarse cloak, with which he carefully con-

cealed his face from sight ; but though she felt extremely interested in this circumstance, Agnes pretended to pay little or no attention to it, and affecting to be cold, rather quickened her pace towards the end of the rampart, still however keeping in view Jachimo and the stranger. When she had reached the end of the walk, she seated herself on the parapet, and desired Laurretta to fetch her another wrapper, for that the air was too sharp for her.

“ Had you not better return to your chamber then ? ” said Laurretta ; “ you will catch cold sitting here.”

“ I must rest, Laurretta,” said Agnes, “ and the air revives me—I shall remain here until your return.”

Laurretta tardily and unwillingly obeyed, often looking back to see that her mistress remained where she had left her, and without making any exertion. This circumstance convinced Agnes that she must not trust Laurretta, simple and affectionate as she appeared ; and the moment the girl had entered the

the door at the opposite end of the rampart, Agnes uttered aloud the name of Jachimo. He looked up, and made a respectful bow.

“ Oh Lady !” exclaimed he, “ I wish more than ever to see you—when can you permit me an interview ?”

“ Can you come to my anti-chamber at night ?” asked Agnes ; but seeing Lauretta returning with more speed than she had set out, she drew back from the edge of the wall, and observed that Jachimo, following the direction of her eye, had remarked the re-appearance of Lauretta, and contented himself with a bow in token of compliance. With this half-appointment Agnes was obliged to be contented, and remained some time longer on the ramparts, lest Lauretta should imagine she had had any plan in sending her away.

Jachimo and his companion soon after quitted the court, and Lauretta exhausted herself in conjectures respecting who and what he could be, and what business he could possibly have to come to the castle in

that strange and secret manner. The circumstance occasioned as much conjecture to the Lady Agnes, but she trusted that he was there for some good purpose, since she saw him conferring with Jachimo; and she earnestly hoped that Lauretta would not find any opportunity of informing Signor Vitalba of it that day, since at night she hoped to learn from Jachimo the real name and purpose of the stranger; and as every hour now seemed pregnant with events, the delay of a day might enable him to accomplish his intentions. With this view she detained Lauretta with her on some pretence or other, till at length the real debility of her frame obliged her to endeavour to take some rest, especially as she was engaged to watch at night for the promised visit of Jachimo.— She chose, however, the hour when the Signors were at table to try to repose herself; and dismissing Lauretta, threw herself on the sofa, and really obtained a short interval of sleep. She awoke refreshed and invigorated, and watched the declining sun as he
lit

lit up the western sky with a thousand glorious colours ; she thought of him who had often shared with her the sublime enthusiasm this noble sight inspires, and was tempted for a moment to repine that they had not continued in that happy ignorance, in which their mutual affection could not have been imputed to them as a fault ; but rejecting with horror this suggestion, she turned from the beautiful sunset which had recalled him to her mind, from whence she so earnestly strove to banish him, and recollecting Lauretta and the stranger, determined, as far as she was able, to frustrate the discovery intended to be made to Vitalba, and summoned her maid to attend her.

Lauretta was full of regret that she had not yet been able to catch the notice of Signor Vitalba, yet Agnes perceived something in her manner which seemed to contradict this regret ; for she was animated, busy, and bustling, and seemed to be occupied with some project of pleasing importance : she talked a great deal, but without

any settled topic ; seemed anxious to get away, yet afraid to propose it, until at length, as night approached, she reminded her mistress that she had lately suffered severely from illness, of which she was by no means recovered, and recommended early hours.

“ You may recollect, Lauretta,” replied Agnes, “ that I slept this afternoon, so that I am not in a hurry to go to bed.—What are you about at that door ?”

“ I was examining, Madam, whether the late storm had at all injured the fastenings ; for they say there was a deal of damage done in the passage beyond it.”

“ It is well remembered,” said Agnes, smiling, “ to examine the fastenings now, when I have been here for several days without thinking of them.”

“ Lord, Madam,” replied Lauretta, “ while you were ill, I thought of nothing in the world but whether you would or would not recover.—I used to be so afraid of your dying, for then I was sure your ghost would always haunt me.”

“ You

"You need not have feared that, Lauretta," said Agnes; "I should have had no reason to persecute and alarm you."

"Oh no, Madam, not you—but your ghost."

"You have a strange idea of a ghost, Lauretta," said Agnes, "and are terribly afraid of them."

"Indeed I am, Madam," answered Lauretta; "and now I think on't, I hope Signor Valenti won't die; for if he does, his ghost will be added to the numbers that are already about the castle."

"Valenti," repeated Agnes, "why should you apprehend Valenti will die?"

"Lord, Madam," said Lauretta, "why don't you know that Signor Pigliani and Signor Valenti fought together, and that Signor Valenti is terribly wounded?"

"No," said Agnes, "how should I know this?—You never told me.—When did it happen?"

"Why, Madam, soon after you were taken ill; there used often to be very high

words between them, and all about your Ladyship, as I understand; but, however, my Lord the Prince controuled them for some time, till at length one day they quarrelled and fought, and Signor Valenti, as I tell your Ladyship, was desperately wounded."

"And Signor Pigliani?" said Agnes.

"Oh he is wounded too, Madam," answered Laretta, "but not so bad as the other;—if he had not been wounded too, he would have fled for his life; for if Signor Valenti dies, his father, Count Ubaldo, swears he will pursue Pigliani to the utmost:—for you know, Madam, it is a shocking thing for a father to lose his only son in a quarrel of this sort."

"Say no more, Laretta," interposed Agnes, "I am quite sick."

"Lord, Madam, then to be sure your Ladyship is in love with Signor Valenti; and I'm sure I don't wonder at it, for he is a sweet young man, so tall, and so handsome,
and

and so warlike.—I only wonder your Ladyship would never acknowledge it before.”

“What nonsense you talk, Lauretta!” replied Agnes; “can I not be hurt at being the occasion of a quarrel, and perhaps of both parties losing their lives, without giving occasion for these foolish imaginations?”

“Nay, Madam,” answered Lauretta, “there is nothing that I see so foolish in the imagination—it is a very likely thing for a young lady to be in love with such a handsome fine gentleman as the Chevalier Valenti—and then for her to be sick when he is wounded;—shall I give you some hartshorn, Madam?”

“You are impertinent, Lauretta.”

“I am sorry for it, Madam—I am sure I do not intend it; but I should rejoice the old Count Ubaldo’s heart if I were to tell him this news;—for he said to me the other day—‘Lauretta,’ says he, ‘it would do my son more good than all the surgeons can do him, if your young mistress would but be kind to him, and concern herself about him;’

and now when he hears this, I dare say the young Chevalier will be well presently."

"I forbid you, however, Laretta, to repeat this nonsense to the Count Ubaldo—you make me quite angry with your folly."

"Lord, Madam," resumed Laretta, "perhaps all the while I'm mistaken—and——"

"Indeed you are," interrupted Agnes; "let me hear no more of it."

"Well then," continued Laretta, unmindful of her Lady's orders, "and so after all, it is Signor Pigliani you prefer.—Well, there's no answering for taste;—to be sure Signor Pigliani is a very handsome gentleman too, though he's neither so tall, nor so stout, nor so young, nor so rich as the Chevalier Valenti."

"Be silent, Laretta!" once more interrupted Agnes; "a while ago you wanted me to go to bed, and now you would keep chattering all night.—Go, you may leave me—I shall want nothing further;—but I
charge

charge you not to mention a syllable of your nonsense to any living being."

"Well, I am sure," retorted Laupetta, as she opened the door, "I shan't mention a syllable of that, or any thing else to the ghosts."

The impertinent loquacity of this girl, and the apparent innocence with which she strove to sift the heart of her mistress, convinced Agnes that she had received some instructions from her superiors, and she blushed to think that any body could condescend to employ so mean an instrument.—Agitated as she was with the idea of Valenti's danger and Pigliani's wound, she could not help hoping that both were exaggerated by the artful malice of Laupetta—nay, perhaps that the whole tale was invented by her.—Yet when she recollected the evident jealousy and animosity she had witnessed between them, she could not but acknowledge that it was at least too probable they had fought; and if once Pigliani was roused to vengeance,

his skill and coolness would give him every advantage over his more impetuous opponent ;—she trembled lest Lauretta should indeed spread about as facts, the impertinent conclusions she had drawn from her apparent concern on account of the duel, and wished she had detained her until she had exacted from her an absolute promise of silence : it was now, however, too late to regret this, and she began to expect Jachimo.

She heard the closing of various doors in different parts of the castle ; and though she knew not what to expect from the circumstances Jachimo had to impart, yet she felt an indescribable hope that they would afford her some comfort.

“ Yet,” thought she, “ what comfort can they afford me ?—They cannot make me other than the daughter of the Prince ; nor Sigismond the son of any one else.—Nothing can release me from the absolute will of my father—from the persecutions I am doomed to undergo on account of these two gentlemen.

tllemen.—Yet, alas ! perhaps they may both fall victims to their ill-placed attachment—Valenti may fall by his actual wound, and Pigliani by the vengeance of Count Ubaldo, and their blood will be on my head !”

As she sat lost in thought, the same noise that had alarmed her the night of the storm, seemed to sound again in the private outlet beyond her room. She had learned that great part of the building that way, which had long been unused by the family, had been thrown into ruins by the violence of the night, and she feared lest it had discovered the secret passage to some of those hordes of banditti, who infested the Apennines, and lest the castle were even now beset by them ;—yet she reflected that she had heard the same sounds previous to the demolition of the buildings ; and she also remembered to have been told that there were dungeons in different parts of the out-works of the castle, and she began to imagine it possible that the noise might proceed from

from some unfortunate wretch imprisoned near her apartment. After a while, however, all sound ceased, and she continued to listen only for Jachimo.

CHAP. VI.

"Alas! I'm fore beset!—Let never man
"For sake of lucre sin against his soul."

HOME.

IT was past one o'clock ere a light tap at the door of her anti-chamber announced the arrival of Jachimo, who excused himself for making her wait so long, by pleading that he had only staid until all the domestics were retired; and Agnes enquired with earnestness what he had to communicate?

"Lady,"

"Lady," said Jachimo respectfully, "be seated—my tale will not be honourable to myself."

"Sorrow for past offences," replied Agnes, "is always honourable."

"I will not take up your time unnecessarily, Lady Agnes," said Jachimo, "but go back at once to the period when I held that place in Prince Rezzonico's favour that Spigno does now. I was then known by the name of Pietro ; nor was my Lord then arrived at the honours he now enjoys—he was simply Monsieur de Meilcour.—His mother, who was an Italian by birth, and a near relation to the family of Mirandola, had displeased all her friends by espousing a French gentleman of independent fortune, but no rank.—There was an old tradition in the family of Mirandola, that the descendants of that race should avoid any alliance beyond the Alps.—Madame de Meilcour thought she obviated the force of this tradition by obliging her lover, before she would become his wife, to purchase a house in
Italy,

Italy, and to reside there.—Young Meilcour was an uncommonly handsome youth, and was educated in strict society with his cousin, young Mirandola;—after their studies were finished, they entered the same corps, and every one admired the friendship between the two cousins.—I was at this time taken into the service of Mons. de Meilcour, and the family of Mirandola were busying themselves to obtain for him some Italian honours, which might annihilate the remembrance of an alliance they could not cordially approve.—Between two campaigns the young Mirandola took his friend home with him to the Castle Pontalti, where the Marquis resided, and where he saw the Lady Agnes di Mirandola, whom her father had destined for a Nun. The young lady, who was in the bloom of health and beauty, recoiled from her destiny, and listened with too much pleasure to the vows of Monsieur de Meilcour.—It was, however, agreed between them that she should appear to submit herself to her father's will; for the remembrance

membrance of the tradition still influenced the house of Mirandola, and they did not think the spell was at an end, because of the intermarriage that had already taken place, and of which young Meilcour was the fruit. No particular misfortunes had followed that union, which it seems were threatened by the tradition, in consequence of any marriage beyond the Alps.—The Lady Agnes then entered the Convent, and by my assistance, and a number of stratagems, my master succeeded in taking her from the Convent.—She wished him to marry her immediately; but whether the licentiousness of his principles made him dislike marriage, or whether he was actuated by a motive of revenge towards the family, who, though personally attached to him, yet always considered him as a disgrace to their house, I cannot exactly tell; but certain it is that he persuaded her it was impossible they could be married in Italy without the knowledge of her family, and that he would only wait till he was out of their reach before he made
her

her his wife.—Blinded by love, and unable to doubt the honour of a man to whom she had given her heart, the unfortunate Lady Agnes consented to travel with him till he should judge they were safe. But in the interval she fell a sacrifice to the arts of my master.—Never shall I forget the despair, the grief of the lovely creature ;—your agonies, Lady, when I recognized in you the daughter of her, of whose fate I always accuse myself, recalled her most forcibly to my mind.—At length he promised to marry her, and employed me to personate a Priest ; but the real virtue of the Lady Agnes induced me to deceive my master, and to procure a Minister, and they were lawfully married ; while he thought he was triumphing repeatedly over her honour, and in her, that of the whole family of Mirandola.—Her father, however, the old Marquis di Mirandola, died, and it was supposed his end was hastened by the misconduct of his daughter ; and in a twelvemonth after the death of the father, the new Marquis, who was married
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to a most lovely and amiable woman, and who was the father of one child, was beset by banditti, and murdered."

"Horrible!" exclaimed Agnes; "Jachimo, this tale affects your feeling heart—you are faint."

"No, Lady," resumed Jachimo, "'tis nothing; but the circumstance was indeed horrible.—You were not yet born, Lady, and I was absent from my master on another service he had commanded me on, when he brutally told your mother that she was not his wife!—He was far away from the place where the ceremony had been performed, and I had all the testimonials of it in my own possession.—The dear Lady left him, and would never see him more.—Where you were born I know not, for, as I said, I was absent;—but I kept the certificates of the marriage, and now, Lady, I will resign them to you.—My master, on the sudden death of the Marquis di Mirandola, assumed, as next heir, his title and honours, and came to take possession of this castle, which was considered

considered as the chief residence of the family, though Pontalti had ever been the favourite abode. Here I again joined my master, and found with surprise that the Lady Agnes was departed no one knew whither.—I, alas! could too well assign a cause for her flight, for I knew she had been most cruelly treated by her husband; and I learnt that he had openly, and in the most inhuman manner, upbraided her with having no right to the titles and honours she enjoyed.—In a very short time, however, my master removed to Pontalti, having ordered his suite of chambers here to be changed—all the former Marquisses having inhabited the opposite side of the quadrangle to that now used, and the original suite of apartments was shut up and deserted.—He remained at Pontalti only long enough to have the change made here, and ordered the Castle of Pontalti to be demolished, and a small villa to be erected in its stead, which was let to a friend.—I soon after quitted my master's service, but not until I heard that
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the Marchioness di Mirandola, as your mother really was, inhabited the Villa Salviati, which had been built with the materials of Pontalti, and which had been, as I mentioned, let to a friend;—that friend was indeed the Prince Rezzonico, whose title and honours my late master afterwards succeeded to, on his friend being attainted of treason, and his estates forfeited to the Government. The new Marquis di Mirandola having been a principal cause of his apprehension, was rewarded with the possession of all he had forfeited.—And this, Lady,” added Jachimo, “is all I will communicate at present—all indeed I know that relates to your mother.—More there is yet to reveal, but that must be done in a different way.—May I in future depend on your protection, Lady Agnes?—I may have great occasion for it.”

“I am much oppressed, my good Jachimo,” said Agnes, “with what you have already told me.—If ever I can be of service to you, I will with gladness, in gratitude for these proofs of honourable birth which
you

you have furnished me with. Yet I wish to make some further enquiries.—Would my poor mother had known, ere she died, that she was not infamous!—but alas! that cannot be recalled—she is now a saint in Heaven!”

“When did she die, Lady?” enquired Jachimo.

“Alas!” replied Agnes, “not many months ago!—But let us not reflect on what cannot be recalled.—Tell me, Jachimo, who is this stranger whom I saw conferring with you in the court-yard this morning?—And how happens it that Prince Rezzonico recollects not his former follower Pietro in his new servant Jachimo?”

“Oh! as for that, Lady,” replied Jachimo, “many years have elapsed since I left his service, and I have undergone many hardships since then.—I should hardly know myself again: those who live luxuriously and delicately, Lady, do not change so much as those who have to encounter hardships and labour.—And now, Lady, let me no longer

longer detain you from your rest.—Good night—may Heaven preserve you!”

“ But, Jachimo, you have not yet answered my first question respecting the stranger who has occasioned so much curiosity among the household.”

“ Pardon me, Madam,” answered he, “ I must not now disclose that secret ;—but cheer up, Lady—rely on the word of a penitent and reformed sinner—there is much good yet in store for you.”

“ For me, alas ! no, Jachimo, that is impossible.”

“ Remember, Lady, the motto of your house,” repeated Jachimo, “ Be faithful and firm ;—you are of the House of Mirandola ; abide by its rule—Be faithful and firm !”—And with a respectful bow Jachimo departed.

Lost in a labyrinth of vague conjectures, it was some time ere Agnes recovered sufficiently to return into her own chamber ; and when there, she regretted that she had not prolonged the conference with Jachimo.

He, who seemed so well instructed in the history of the unfortunate House of Miranda, whose possessions had all centered in her father, whose whole life also he had witnessed, would certainly have been able to have informed her of the birth of Sigismond—and to have had the dreadful truth confirmed by Jachimo, would, she imagined, for ever have annihilated doubt.—Long she dwelt on this subject, and wished it possible to recal Jachimo; his repetition of the motto—Faithful and firm—which she had observed all over the castle, struck her prodigiously.—Could he mean to advise her to be faithful to Sigismond?—Did he then know that the circumstances of his birth would allow her to be so?—Could she continue to love him without a crime?—And could Jachimo know this, and refuse to tell her so with all the explicitness her unfortunate situation had a right to demand?—Alas! she dared not flatter herself that he meant to enforce her fidelity to her lover—surely, had he intended to do this, common humanity

nity would have obliged him to give her some reason for advice so contrary to what appeared her duty.—It was indeed possible that Jachimo might still be a tool in the hands of her enemies; that he might seek to betray her into the commission of wrong actions; though she could imagine no motive he could have for such atrocious hypocrisy. Who, in fact, could be sufficiently her enemy to employ such an emissary?—Of her father's principles, though from Jachimo's story she could not think them correctly good, yet she could not suppose them so dreadful as to seek to plunge her into so terrible a crime;—besides, he had given sufficient proof that he wished nothing so much as to separate her for ever from Sigismond. Nor could she conceive any motive any person could have to pursue such conduct.—All then she could reasonably imagine to reconcile these discordant circumstances, was that Jachimo was ignorant of the particulars of her situation.—Yet now a kind of suspicion had taken possession of her heart against

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him,

him, she wished not to see him any more ; she repented that she had promised him her protection—she might have promised it to one who was only seeking to entangle her in snares that would lead her to ruin.—Still she regretted that she had asked him no particulars of the *rencontre* between Pigliani and Valenti ; that event, which for a moment she had been tempted to believe a fabricated history, related to surprise her into an avowal of preference for one or the other, was, she felt on further deliberation, the only thing that could account for the long respite she had experienced from persecution on that subject. In short, the conference with this Jachimo, though it had put her in possession of one story coherently told, and which seemed to tally exactly with her mother's character and conduct, yet had left her so unsatisfied in other respects, that she wished either that she had prolonged it, or that it had not taken place at all.

On her mother's persecutions and sufferings she was unequal to ruminate—the multiplicity

tiplicity of sorrows that oppressed her, threatened to disturb her brain, and she walked to and fro in a vague kind of reverie without connexion, and almost without consciousness; when suddenly her attention was painfully aroused by a noise evidently in the secret passage approaching her door.—She heard footsteps and whisperings; and while she was advancing for the purpose of examining the fastenings, about which Laretta had been so suspiciously busy, she perceived the door slowly unclose, and instantly shut to again.

Trembling and dismayed, she knew not what to apprehend; her heart beat too violently for her to form any reasonable conjecture. One moment she expected to see him return who had that way escaped, and the next she dreaded to be surrounded by a horde of ruffians. Some minutes passed in this dreadful uncertainty; still she heard whisperings, and advancing close to the door, distinguished the words, “He is not yet come.”

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This person, thus anxiously expected, must, to be sure, be the principal of the party.—She advanced cautiously to the door, meaning to secure one of the bolts; but she found the fastening had been wholly destroyed, and carried away.—This proof of treachery in Lauretta stung her to the heart; it almost destroyed the latent hope that the nightly invader might be Sigismond, from whom she could fear no evil, though she was conscious she ought to behold him no more.

Still in fearful suspense she stood, when suddenly it occurred to her that she would quit the room, and seek shelter in any other from an invasion so formidable; but her weakness rooted her to the spot, and the moment she attempted to move, she felt as if she should instantly faint.

An increased whispering seemed to announce the arrival of the expected person, and in another moment all was silent.—While she now gazed in breathless horror,
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the door once more opened, and Signor Vitalba was at her feet.

“ Loveliest Agnes,” said he, “ let me rescue you from tyranny and oppression, and bear you to a sanctuary never to be invaded but by love.” And his eyes glowed with an ardour not to be mistaken.

Immediate terror of his purpose dispelled the previous weakness of Agnes, and she attempted to fly ; but he suddenly rose, and catching her in his arms, bore her with incredible swiftness into the dark recesses of the passages, where, when sufficiently removed from the habitable parts of the castle, he rested with his burthen until his followers overtook him.

Agnes looked wildly in the faces of the men ; Jachimo was not among them, and she felt thankful that he was not concerned in this treachery.

Signor Vitalba now addressed her with an uncontrouled tenderness in his manner that redoubled her alarms ; and placed her in a kind of litter, which he ordered two of his

men to remove. She attempted to expostulate, but unequal to the effort, she fainted wholly away; nor was her present tyrant sorry to secure his retreat while she continued in a state of insensibility.

CHAP. VII.

“ And will Heaven suffer it? Will the just Gods
“ That tread yon spangled pavement o’er our heads,
“ Look from their skies, and “ bear it?”

MASON.

HOW long the Lady Agnes remained in that situation she knew not; but when she awoke from her stupor, she thought she was in a dream. She was on a bed in a chamber she was unacquainted with, and a woman

man she had never seen before, but whose face beamed with benevolence, stood beside her. She uttered some wild exclamations, which her kind nurse endeavoured to silence; at length she enquired rationally where she was, and promised, if satisfied in this particular, to be obedient.

“ You are with friends, Lady,” replied her attendant; “ you shall not be molested.”

“ Am I,” said Agnes, “ in the power of Signor Vitalba?”

“ You are not,” was the reply.

“ Thank Heaven!—But where then am I?” enquired she.

“ Indeed, Lady, you are safe—be satisfied.”

“ Ha!” exclaimed Agnes, “ surely I am still at Voltorno—I well remember that withered fir.—Speak, am I at Voltorno?”

“ You are, Lady.”

“ But you are safe, my child,” said a mild benevolent voice, which Agnes instantly knew.

“ Oh my Father ! my good, my revered Buonafede, let me but behold you ! ”

He advanced, and extending his arms, pressed the delighted Agnes to his venerable heart.

“ I am satisfied,” said Agnes, and in a few minutes sunk into a sweet and quiet slumber. She awoke in a very short time refreshed and invigorated ; and as she opened her eyes, and beheld the good Buonafede still beside her bed, she exclaimed—

“ Oh ! who was that whose form I saw gliding out of sight ? ”

“ My child,” said the Father, “ what do you mean ? ”

“ Nay,” repeated Agnes, “ I saw some other person—Oh tell me is it—is it one I ought never to behold again ? ”

“ You are scarcely awake, my Agnes,” said Buonafede.

“ Nay, Father,” replied she, “ I am too well awake—Oh I have suffered many terrible realities !—Alas ! my Father, Sigismond is my brother ! ” and a violent burst of tears

relieved her heart. Oppressed as she was, however, she distinctly heard her sobs answered by the still unseen form, and throwing herself in agony again down on the couch, she exclaimed—

“ It is himself—let me not see him—my senses will not bear it !”

“ Great have been your trials, my beloved child,” said Buonafede, “ and nobly have you borne them ; but you will be rewarded.”

“ Alas ! Father,” said Agnes, “ the power of happiness is gone for ever from me.”

“ Not so, my daughter,” replied the good Father, “ say not so.—Virtuous exertion is its own reward.”

“ Oh Holy Father !” exclaimed she, “ tell me—tell me all—you know much.—How came you here?—how was I rescued from Vitalba?—and why do you talk to me of happiness?—Tell me all—I can bear it, indeed I can !”

" You were met, and rescued from Signor Vitalba," replied Buonafede, " and brought back hither."

" By whom," interrupted Agnes, as he hesitated.

" I was of the party," replied the holy Father.

" But how came you to be travelling towards Voltorno?" demanded she.

" I was coming to pay a visit to Bertoldo, a dying brother of our order," answered Buonafede.

" This is not all," said Agnes; " who was he that was watching me during my sleep—and why was he here?—Tell me quickly, was it not Sigismond?"

" It was," said Buonafede.

Agnes wept in silence, and then added—

" We will speak of him no more—if possible, I will think of him no more.—Where is my father, Prince Rezzonico?—I want to tell him that my mother was his wife."

" His wife!" exclaimed Buonafede.

" Yes,

“ Yes, I learnt it from Jachimo; and many more things I have learnt—but my poor head is bewildered.—Oh Father! I shall tire you with my wildness; you have more important concerns; leave me—by and by I shall be more composed;—but I have the testimonials of her marriage—I will shew them to my father, and hear him acknowledge her his true and lawful wife; and then you shall take them to Salviati, and deposit them in the tomb beside her mouldering remains.—Would she had possessed them before her death!”

“ Be patient and resigned, my daughter,” said Buonafede; “ your mother is happy.”

“ I am resigned,” answered Agnes; “ but, my good Father, leave me—my head wanders—I shall recollect myself in silence and solitude.—But let me not see Lauretta; she is treacherous—it was she who betrayed me to Vitalba.”

“ You shall not, my child,” replied Buonafede; “ the woman you have already seen, is the only attendant you shall have—
she

she is the wife of a peasant in the neighbourhood, whom we called to assist you."

"She is good," said Agnes, "I am satisfied with her;—but one thing more, my Father—where am I?"

"In one of the lower apartments, my daughter, whither we conveyed you for the sake of speed.

She replied in a low voice—

"I knew very little of the castle—I did not recollect this room."

The holy Father judging that too much conversation upon such various topics, and every one so deeply interesting, would only serve to agitate the already feeble Agnes, bade her farewell for a short interval, and went into the adjoining room, where he found Sigismond, who had escaped, unseen, through a private door, during the questions Agnes had asked. The kind arms of the holy Father were open to receive the youth, who wept for some minutes in agony; then recovering himself, he said—

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"We are not here to waste, in useless grief, moments that are pregnant with important events—we are here, my Father, to be faithful and firm;—yet do I dread to explore the depths of this horrible mystery—I dread lest I have indulged a hope that, if crushed, will plunge me into tenfold despair."

"Fear not, my son," replied Buonafede; "Zadeski would not have buoyed you up with false hopes.—We shall yet search into the record of the wretch's crimes, and establish all we wish to prove."

"The hour approaches," replied Sigismond; "is Zadeski yet arrived?"

"I know not," answered Buonafede; "but it will be as well to keep our council secret until we can come forward with a consistent story, to overwhelm the monster at once with the full conviction of his guilt."

"Oh Heavens!" exclaimed Sigismond, in agony, "and must I believe Agnes to be indeed the child of a man so laden with crimes?"

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“ That point, I fear, is too firmly established,” answered the Father; “ but she is, however, his lawful child, unless her reason wanders : she declares she has the testimonials of her mother’s union, and that she obtained this testimony from Jachimo ;—but how shall we conceal our conferences from the Prince ?”

“ I can arrange that,” replied Sigismond ; “ we will hold our divan in the deserted apartments, whither no one will follow us. And come you now, my Father, and let me shew you all the cruel mementos of the miserable Marquis di Mirandola. In those apartments, where I have passed so many melancholy hours, he once lived in happiness and splendour—in those very apartments he was afterwards confined—and in the vaults below, I too truly fear, murdered, and left to perish unburied !—Oh my Father ! the records of his sufferings, engraven on the walls of that turret, which, from yonder corner of the edifice, overlooks so vast an extent of country, would make a heart of
marble

marble ache ; judge then of the effect they took on me, fearing as I did to undergo a similar fate, and, as the event has proved, not fearing without reason that such a fate was designed me.—Even now I dare not indulge the full extent of the hopes offered to me—there are so many intricate circumstances to develope, so many witnesses to collect and examine, and Rezzonico is so high in power and in rank—he has so many adherents, so many friends——”

“ And you, my son,” interposed Buonafede, “ have Heaven and Truth on your side.—Of many witnesses you are sure—Zadeski, Jeronymo, Ghiberti are your faithful friends ; Pietro too is here, who, though once a villain, yet now repents his former crimes, and is eager to do you justice ;—and this Jachimo, who gave to Agnes the credentials of her mother’s marriage, may be able to be of some use, and most probably would be willing to do so.—But come, my son, the time approaches ; let us call together

ther our friends, and repair to the appointed place—Zadeski may be ere this arrived.”

“ Oh my Father,” said Sigismond, “ what do I not owe to you !—You, who sheltered my helpless infancy, who befriended my growing youth, are now, in your advanced age, come a long journey from your peaceful home, to support me in the most arduous trial I can endure ;—but we forget the situation of the venerable Bertoldo.—Come, my Father, let us hasten to those ruined apartments I so long inhabited, and let us, with the keys taken from the dying Federico, examine into the situation of the wretched Bertoldo.”

They passed lightly along the corridor, and, by various turnings well-known to Sigismond, reached at length the ruined side of the quadrangle. Here Sigismond led his venerable friend into the room so long his prison, and from thence, without losing a minute, they resolved to descend into the vaults, and open the dungeon where Bertoldo was confined ; but the attention of Buonafede

was

was irresistibly arrested by the portrait of the late Marquis di Mirandola, and the trophy beneath it.

“ Oh my son !” exclaimed the excellent man, “ there can remain no doubt—that picture would be a sufficient witness of the truth, without the testimony of one human being.—Go on, my son ; be faithful and firm, and you shall triumph.”

“ Yes, shades of the injured House of Mirandola,” said the youth, bending his knee, and looking around him, but fixing his chief regards on the portrait of the Marquis, “ I will obey your silent orders—I will be faithful and firm in the cause of Truth and Justice, and pursue villany and crime into its deepest recesses ;—though it lurk in the heart of Rezzonico, the sword of virtue shall force it thence !”

A sudden and awful clap of thunder at that instant shook the building, and Buonafede and Sigismond hailed the omen ; with redoubled alacrity they now passed through those ruined rooms, and while they
gave

gave a sigh to the remains of former magnificence, they exulted in the hope of restoring the rightful heir of Mirandola to his lawful possessions.

Sigismond led the way ; he bore in his hand the keys which he had taken from Federico, who was mortally wounded in the combat which had released the Lady Agnes from the power of Vitalba ; and holding aloft a torch to guide them through the subterranean passages he knew so well, he quickly stopped before the door of Bertoldo's dungeon, and applying the keys, the locks gave way ; but the utter silence made him fear he had arrived too late. He called to Buonafede, who entered with the torch, and they beheld the poor victim to relentless cruelty stretched out on the damp earth, his emaciated frame cold, lifeless, and without pulsation.—They wept over the remains of the innocent Priest, who was sacrificed because he knew too much—sacrificed to the fears of Rezzonico, that the very appearance of Sigismond would explain a story
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he wished for ever buried in oblivion. They raised between them the inanimate body, and bore it in silence from the dungeon. They gazed on the damp walls, the grating at top, the chain, and all the harsh appendages of misery the place exhibited—they saw the remains of his coarse food, and shed a tear over the sufferings he had undergone!

“Thou art happy, Bertoldo,” exclaimed Buonafede, “but thy benevolent heart would have exulted in the restoration of the true *Mirandola*!” and as he spoke, he laid his hand on the bosom that covered that heart once so alive to every sensation; a feeble pulsation met his hand—“He yet lives!” whispered the good Father, “our care may even now restore him.”

They bore him with the gentlest care to Sigismond’s late apartment, where they found Zadeski, Jeronymo, and Ghiberti arrived. Seeing the situation of poor Bertoldo, their first attention was all devoted to him, and Zadeski, having some little skill in medicine,

cine, directed proper applications, which Ghiberti assisted in procuring; and in less than an hour the venerable man recovered some degree of recollection. They would not suffer him to express his feelings; but recommending him to be quiet, and endeavour to slumber, they adjourned into the adjoining room, formerly the bed-room of the Marquis di Mirandola.

“ Ah!” exclaimed Jeronymo, “ how could I forget the penitent Pietro, now known by the name of Jachimo! Since my arrival here in my disguise, he has been the only one who has recognized me; and he, having been the confidential servant of the villain Meilcour at the period of the Marquis’s murder, has much to unfold. As for Federico, I know not whether he will live long enough, or if he live, whether he will have strength to confess the particulars of the deed he assisted in perpetrating.”

Jeronymo now left the room, and presently after introduced Pietro, as he had now resumed his former appellation:—as
Pietro,

Pietro, he might strike terror into the guilty bosom of his former master; as Jachimo, he had passed him without discovery.

“ Now then,” said Buonafede, “ we are all assembled—Pietro, you were the confidential follower of him who now calls himself Rezzonico, at a period previous to the atrocious crimes we are now met together to consider—will you relate what you know of his conduct ?”

“ Willingly,” replied Pietro; “ truly penitent for the part I bore in conduct so wicked, so infernal !”

Pietro then related the circumstances of Meilcour’s treachery to the Lady Agnes di Mirandola, instancing many particulars of his cruelty to her, which he did not mention to the present Lady Agnes, for fear of too deeply wounding her tender bosom by the recital of her mother’s sufferings; but at the mention of her lawful marriage—

“ I,” exclaimed Zadeski, “ can attest the truth of that circumstance—I myself performed the ceremony—and the Lady Agnes
had

had a right to share the honours afterwards possessed by Monsieur de Meilcour."

"It was during my absence," resumed Pietro, "artfully contrived for that purpose, no doubt (for, villain as I was, I still felt much attachment to my gentle and lovely mistress), that Monsieur de Meilcour told her she was his only by the ties of love; that no legal Priest had celebrated their union, and that he was on the point of marriage with another;—adding, with a libertine air, as I was informed by another who is since dead, but who was, like myself, in his master's confidence—that he still loved her, and she was welcome to live with him, and share his favours."

"And on what account were you absent, Pietro?" enquired Buonafede.

"Alas!" replied Pietro, "I was sent to Pontalti, to see whether Federico had fully executed the barbarous business he was sent upon; and to explain this circumstance, I must relate every particular of the history:—The young Marquis di Mirandola, whose baptismal

baptifinal names were Henry Sebastian, had married, previous to his father's death, the Lady Hypolita di Borromeo, of a noble family at Rome; this lovely and amiable couple loved each other with the most unbounded affection, and Mirandola had honoured his unworthy cousin Meilcour with the tenderest friendship previous to his treachery in stealing the Lady Agnes from her Convent."

"Indeed," interrupted Ghiberti, "that is true—I was in the service of the old Marquis, and passed thence to his son.—He would often say, 'Even now, would Meilcour but come forward with his wife to plead for him, I would receive him again like my friend and brother.'—And you, Jeronymo, can testify with me the mutual affection that subsisted between the Marquis and Marchioness.—Do you not remember the joy on the birth of an heir?"

"Full well," answered Jeronymo, "this castle was illuminated, the poor all round were feasted and made happy, and such rejoicings

joicings as Voltorno has never known since, nor ever will, till the right heir be established in his own domains. Nerina, who was afterwards my wife, was then in the service of the Marquis."

"And Nerina," exclaimed Sigismond, "does she still live?"

"Hush!" interposed Buonafede; "proceed, Jeronymo."

"It was in this castle, in the room adjoining to this, that the Marchioness was delivered—her son received at the font the names of Hypolito Henry Sigismond."—Sigismond here gave a deep sigh.—"The infant was near three months old when the Marquis, seeing his lovely wife perfectly recovered, left her with the babe, which she nourished at her own bosom, here at Voltorno, and went to Pontalti, whither some necessary business called him. The journey was long, but the Marquis had performed it before, and my Lady saw him depart without any terrible apprehensions, only from motives of tenderness
lamenting

lamenting his absence ;—that absence, however, gradually became alarming, and at length, wild with despair, the Marchioness, with a small number of attendants, of which Nerina and myself were part, set out with her infant to seek her husband at Pontalti. In the woods near that castle, we found the murdered body of a man, which, on examination, was discovered to be that of one of the servants who had accompanied the Marquis ; this circumstance filled us all with alarms, and, without mentioning it to our Lady, we caused strict search to be made for his body.—When we reached Pontalti, we found that the Marquis had never been there, and it was necessary to disclose to the Marchioness the circumstance of our having found the body of Paulo. This, which confirmed her worst fears, threw her into so terrible a fever, that her life was despaired of, and in the interval Monsieur de Meilcour arrived to take possession of the estates.—There were only servants on the spot, and though we were conscious that the estates

and titles belonged only to the infant son of our late master, it was not in our power to resist him. He pretended a licence from the Government to hold the estates in his own hands during his own life, at his death to descend to the infant ; and instantly assumed the title of Marquis di Mirandola.—The Marchioness, who strove to live on account of her child, was compelled, by the reiterated persuasions and menaces of Meilcour, to admit him to her presence, when he had the impudence to talk to her of love, and persecuting her with his odious proposals, made it believed in the castle that she was willing to comply with them ; nay, indeed he insinuated a belief that it was not the first time he had succeeded in obtaining a return of love from the Lady Hypolita, and that the infant heir of Mirandola was indeed his son !”

“ Oh God !” exclaimed Sigismond.

“ Bear up, Sigismond,” cried Buonafede, “ disgrace not your mother’s fame—be faithful and firm !”

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“ This tale,” continued Jeronymo, “ though it met with credit and support from his own people, was disbelieved by those of the Marchionefs ; but we were few in number, and powerless, and Meilcour continued to persecute her with proposals of marriage, by which, he impudently said, to those in the castle, that he meant to heal all old grievances, and make Sigismond his lawful heir.—The Marchionefs, however, who, not without reason, apprehended that means would be taken to remove the true heir of Mirandola, sent Nerina to call me into her chamber privately one night, and with many tears and prayers committed the son of her bosom to our care. She and Nerina had previously determined to put the babe under the care of the venerable Father Buonafede, without revealing even to him the true name and condition of the child.”

“ This ignorance had nearly been fatal to us,” interposed Buonafede, “ for had I been more fully confided in, I could better have defended my charge from the claims of
13 Meilcour ;

Meilcour; for no other name can I give him."

"All," said Zadeski, "has happened for the best; had you still detained the youth with you, had you refused him to the claims of this villain, these opportunities of developing and punishing such enormous guilt had not occurred."

"True," replied Buonafede; "continue, Jeronymo, your account."

"When Nerina and myself," said Jeronymo, "returned from our journey, we found Pontalti wholly abandoned, save by one man, who had been one of the most insignificant menials of the family; he said the Marquis and Marchioness were married, and gone to reside at Voltorno. To Voltorno we instantly followed, suspecting some foul treachery had been done our Lady equal to that we all suspected our Lord had suffered by. At Voltorno we were told the Marchioness was no more, nor could all our enquiries for many months obtain any further information. We were shewn her coffin
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in the family vault, with her name and age particularly and truly inscribed upon it ; and Nerina could not doubt the truth of the account, because her Lady had ever had so strong a presentiment that she should not survive her persecutions from Meilcour.—

When all hope was gone, Nerina and myself were married ; and settling at some distance from Voltorno, had little hope of ever being called upon again, till we beheld Ghiberti?"

Here Jeronymo ended his relation, and Zadeski again looked towards Pietro.

" I told you, Signors," resumed he, " that I was sent to Pontalti to see whether Federico had well executed the barbarous business he was sent upon :—this business was to hire and head a gang of ruffians, and to waylay the Marquis, of whose journey to Pontalti we all knew, as we did indeed every circumstance that occurred in the family.—Federico's orders were to murder the followers, and to take the Marquis alive. This he performed ; and I met him after he had disbanded his gang, and rewarded them,

who neither knew their employer nor their victim, conducting the Marquis in a close carriage to Voltorno.—I entered the carriage with him; he had not escaped unwounded, but his wounds were not dangerous.—On the road we passed the Marchioness, and judged she was going to Pontalti to seek her husband. Federico had the barbarity to tell the wretched Marquis, as he perceived who was in the carriage, that his wife was now going in search of him—‘It is pleasant, is it not,’ added he, ‘that she should pass you on the road without knowing it, unless indeed, her sympathy for you should give her a pang?’—Even I, hardened villain as I then was, could not bear this inhumanity—I exclaimed against it in very severe terms; but the Marquis patiently and gently replied, ‘It matters very little what he says to me—nothing indeed but the consciousness of my Hypolita’s misery can embitter death to me;—but I needed not to be reminded that she was miserable—I was too fully sensible of this, and the certainty

tainty that she has just passed me, does not add one pang to those I now feel on her account.'—We conveyed the unhappy man alive, though extremely weakened, to Voltorno. Monsieur de Meilcour had already gained over some of the servants to his interest, and we were easily admitted.—The Marquis cast up his appealing eyes to Heaven—'What,' exclaimed he, 'am I to be made a prisoner in my own castle—and for what horrible purpose?'—'A prisoner,' said Federico, 'is as well in one place as in another; and we rather thought, Signor Marchese, that you would have preferred residing in Voltorno to any other place.'—The patient sufferer answered only by a sigh, and we led him between us to the turret; here he remained some weeks, during which interval the reports hourly gained ground at the castle, of the passion of Hypolita for the new Marquis, and even of her having entertained it, and indulged it criminally, previous to the supposed death of her husband.—One day, I never shall forget it, I accompanied Federico

to the turret where the Marquis was confined, and his barbarous jailer addressed him in these insulting terms—‘ Well, Signor Marchese, I have good news for you : the Marchioness has chosen another husband, and is no longer the Dowager Marchioness di Mirandola ;—the present Marquis means to take every step to legitimize the son you have so often caressed as your’s, but which, by the free confession of the Lady Hypolita, has no relation at all to you.’—‘ Villain,’ exclaimed the unhappy man, ‘ every word of this is false ; and were it not for these chains which confine me, I would chastise the insolent menial who dares report such slander of the Marchioness di Mirandola.’—Federico made him some taunting reply, to which the Marquis answered with appropriate indignation ; and Federico became so enraged, that he swore he would no longer suffer him to live—he would drag him down to a window where he might witness the mutual fondness between his master and the Lady Hypolita, and then he should meet
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the fate he had so long deserved.—Here,” continued Pietro, “Federico dragged him from the turret, he resisting the whole time, so that the other, being determined, drew his sabre, and gave him several wounds, which marked the stairs and walls that led to the turret ; the poor Marquis fainted with the loss of blood, and Federico dragged him down the stairs that led into the subterranean vaults, immediately under this side of the castle ;—he was there left to perish beneath the misery of his newly received wounds and the want of food ; for no one ever went near him more, and there perhaps his bones still remain unburied.”

“ Oh Heavens !” exclaimed Sigismond, “ what a dreadful end !—I found there those unburied bones, and suspected then what this confession of Pietro’s so completely proves.—I also found on the stairs near the bones a ring of diamonds, with the inscription, ‘ H. S. di Mirandola,’ round the inner circlet ; but the next time I went, the bones were removed.”

“ They were,” replied Pietro; “ I questioned the dying Federico respecting the corse of the wretched Marquis, and he told me he had once been terribly frightened by finding the door on the lower stairs opened, and that he had removed the bones to a more obscure corner. Another time he told me, he was again extremely terrified by seeing the Chevalier Sigismond in the vaults, armed with some of the Marquis’s own weapons; he fully thought it was his injured spirit coming to avenge his death.— As I was very lukewarm in the proceedings against the Marquis,” continued Pietro, “ I began to fear there was no more safety for me at Voltorno, and I demanded and obtained my discharge; nor did I ever expect to hear again of the proceedings here, for I lived in the most perfect ignorance of the affairs of this world, until the arrival of the Signor Pigliani and the Lady Agnes at the ruined abode of the banditti. The moment I saw her lovely and innocent face, I thought on the angel I had contributed to make
5 wretched;

wretched;—yet even then, such were the dreadful effects of the abandoned life I had been leading, the sight of her beauty inflamed me as well as the rest of the gang.”

Sigismond here arose from his seat in uncontrollable agitation, and threw a menacing look at Pietro.

“Nay, Signor,” resumed Pietro, “I had the good fortune, thanks to the Lady Agnes’s discretion, to escape from the temptation myself, and to save her from the rest of the fraternity; and seeing among the attendants of Signor Pigliani, her conductor, a face I remembered at Voltorno, it occurred to me that she was going to her father, who, deceived himself, would think her only a child of love, and might not pay her the honour and respect due alike to her birth and her beauty. I saw too, in the anger my comrades expressed for the disappointment I had caused them, that there was no further peace for me among them; and on strong promises of secrecy with respect to the abode of my former friends, I obtained permission to quit
the

the party, and attend Signor Pigliani and the Lady Agnes, in hopes to be of some use ; but, until the arrival of Jeronymo, who instantly recognized me, although none of the other servants recollected me, I had no hope of being able to bring forward such material evidence as I have now done. He informed me that he was coming to prove the birth of the contested youth, whom he and Nerina had borne away from the pursuits of Monsieur de Meilcour, and to prove him to be truly the son of the murdered Marquis."

" There is little, indeed no doubt of the fact," said Zadeski ; " but I fear we shall require the evidence of Nerina to convict this man."

" She is in a cottage near," replied Jeronymo, " ready to appear at the first summons, and ready to give oath of what no one ever doubted, but through the cruel insinuations of the murderer, of the strong and tender affection that subsisted between the Lady Hypolita and her husband."

" And

“ And does no one know,” asked Buonafede, “ what became of the Marchioness, whether she really did give her hand to the wretch who slandered her ?”

“ She never did,” answered Ghiberti ; “ I was in the castle at that eventful period, and her death freed her from the persecutions of the man she detested.”

“ Alas !” exclaimed Sigismond, who had listened with agonized attention to the history of his parents’ sufferings, “ I have then no father, no mother !—my very birth is doubtful, and Rezzonico is sufficiently artful to envelope the whole in obscurity, notwithstanding the clearness and precision with which the whole tale is told.”

“ There can be no doubt, my Sigismond,” interposed Buonafede, “ that you are truly the son of the murdered Marquis di Mirandola, and the Lady Hypolita di Borromeo, nobly descended on both sides, and far removed from any relation to this villain—this murderer ;—but there is yet one thing which I wish resolved :—when your marriage with
Agnes

Agnes St. Clair was determined, there was some one to whom the Lady St. Clair applied, but the messenger she sent never returned.—Who can explain that circumstance?”

“That can I,” answered Ghiberti, “but before I presume to utter a syllable on any subject, let me endeavour to clear myself to my Lord, for recommending to him to confide in such a wretch as Federico.—The man had completely deceived me, and I thought him worthy of trust;—I fear he has been accessary to much mischief.—Say, my Lord, can you pardon me?”

“Most willingly, Ghiberti,” replied Sigismond, “even if Federico has by any means increased the general mass of suffering, it has but accelerated the present happy event.—You have my full pardon, and my gratitude for your spontaneous attachment.”

“You honour me too highly,” replied Ghiberti, “and now to proceed with our history.—I have continued in the service of
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the Lord of this castle ever since the time of the old Marquis di Mirandola—I succeeded to the service of his son, the murdered Henry Sebastian; and thinking that time would perhaps enable me to assist in clearing up the mysteries and crimes of his successor, I remained with him as Marquis di Mirandola, and as Prince Rezzonico. This accession of title and property was obtained like all the rest—by treachery, if not murder;—for the late Prince Rezzonico was the friend of the present one, and after the demolition of the Castle Pontalti, which my Lord could never bear, and the erection of the Villa Salviati out of its materials, the true Prince rented the villa of my master; but was applied to, as I afterwards found, by Madame St. Clair herself, whom he had always known, being a distant relation of the family of Mirandola, to place her in a secure asylum. He thought no place more secure than the Villa Salviati, to which the usurper Mirandola entertained so great an aversion; and the Lady St. Clair went thither to reside, without

without knowing that she was going to her father's estate. That very circumstance, however, in time, endeared the place to her ; and finding herself unmolested by the successor to the honours of her family, she continued to live there.—Prince Rezzonico supplied her with the money necessary to support her and her daughter ; and it was but immediately previous to her sudden death that my master, with a treacherous secrecy, pretended to develope to Government a treasonable plot of the Prince, and succeeded in having him cast into prison, and I believe executed, or privately massacred, while he himself, having the inheritance vested in him as a reward for his loyalty to Government, sunk, in the new title of Prince Rezzonico, the grating remembrance of Mirandola.—The Lady St. Clair's messenger, not knowing the purport of her letter, nor indeed, had he known it, not qualified to judge, when he found the former Prince taken to prison, and his honours and titles descended to my Lord, brought the letter
hither ;

hither ; which unveiling at once the abode of Sigismond, occasioned his journey to claim the youth.—The name of St. Clair, though he had formerly heard that his forsaken wife had assumed it, struck not then on his mind—the joy of having found the true heir of Mirandola, him whose death he had so long wished, and of whose personal appearance he had so much reason to stand in awe, absorbed every other consideration ; and recollecting that Nerina had disappeared at the time of the loss of the infant, he conjectured the rest of the facts as they really were, and deceiving Father Buonafede by his treachery, obtained possession of the being whose destruction he most wished.—These particulars I learned from Spigno, who is now in my Lord's confidence, and who never suspected me of what he would have called disloyalty.—You may remember, Signor Sigismond, that on our journey hither I could not help treating you with a more familiar affection than became a servant ;

vant ; but I loved your father, and could not help loving his counterpart also."

" I do most gratefully remember, good Ghiberti, your kindness to me from the first beginning of our journey ; and I have since been very apprehensive that you had fallen a victim to your affection, since your disappearance so immediately after Signor Vitalba's discovering your intended nocturnal visit to me, seemed to say that the vengeance of Rezzonico had overtaken you."

" Why in truth, Signor," replied Ghiberti, " I found that I was an object of suspicion to the Prince, and I took an opportunity to escape in a mysterious and unobserved manner ; which, I find, has occasioned a report that my master had either imprisoned or murdered me ;—but in fact, I suspected the designs of the Prince against you, and determined to find out Jeronymo. While I was imparting to him all my suspicions and discoveries, you, Signor, arrived with the two holy Fathers, and fully proved the facts I before but surmised."

" I

“ I shall not forget,” answered Sigismond, “ that I am indebted to you for active exertions and spontaneous good intentions in my favour, and I trust that I shall hereafter be enabled to reward them.”

“ Ah Signor !” replied Ghiberti, “ I shall be fully rewarded if I can but see the true heir of Mirandola established in his rights.”

“ We have now heard all,” interposed Zadeski, “ that is necessary to be related ;—it now then only remains to plan our measures for to-morrow.—The three cavaliers, on whom this execrable villain most depended, are now disabled : Vitalba is a prisoner in our hands, and Valenti and Pigliani wounded by each other ;—there remains then you say, Sigismond, of his usual circle, only Count Ubaldo, and the pretended Priest Regolo Carucci ;—his servants, except the vile Federico, whom we have secured, his artful agent Spigno, and the superannuated Benedetto, are by no means firmly attached to him.—Go then boldly, Sigismond, at the head of your friends, and
claim

claim your rights—it will be lovely to see the villain tremble at the demands of innocence. If he refuse to confess and yield, we will then call in the Officers of Justice—we have sufficient proof against him, and all will yet be well.”

“ There is one point,” answered Sigismond, “ which I fear will not be properly explained.—If this villain persists in asserting that I am his son, if he still claims a paternal authority over me on the score of my mother’s weakness, though no one will believe, who shall confute the tale ?”

“ ’Tis true,” resumed Zadeski, “ that you are the son of the Marchioness, can be proved beyond dispute ; but if he persists in this unaccountable claim, not all the unblemished virtue of your mother, nor your striking resemblance to the late Marquis, which has been acknowledged by so many, can afford more than presumptive proof ; and strong as these are, they are not to be admitted in a legal process.”

“ So

“ So then, after all,” resumed Sigismond, “ my future happiness is to depend on the unblushing assurance with which this monster can assert a lie—a lie, which will so amply gratify his vindictive hatred.—Alas ! I fear my chance for felicity is but slender, though I may obtain security in greatness.”

“ We will debate this point no further, my son,” interposed Buonafede, “ it grows late—let us separate, and let us not forget the situation of Bertoldo.”

At these words Ghiberti, Jeronymo, and Pietro departed, and the two Priests and Sigismond returned to the bed where rested the harassed body of the good Bertoldo, who had obtained some quiet sleep, and was much refreshed and invigorated ; they offered him some refreshments, more delicate than those assigned to him in his dungeon, and seeing him in a way to mend, they retired again into the late Marquis’s chamber, that their conference might not disturb him, and continued talking over the various circumstances of the late wonderful discoveries,
until

until Buonafede and Zadefski were both oppressed with sleep. The greater agitation of Sigismond's mind kept him waking—the uncertainty that still harassed him, with respect to the Lady Agnes; for even if he established his birth beyond a shadow of doubt, was it likely she would accept a man that had pursued her father to death, to an ignominious death from the offended laws of his country?—And was it not still more probable, that, whatever might be the event of the trial, the crafty Rezzonico might still contrive to involve them in doubt with respect to their consanguinity, and by this means for ever prevent their union, and destroy their happiness?—These reflections banished all sleep from the eyes of Sigismond, and the morning peeped through the broken shutters of the deserted apartment, and saw him still pacing, with unequal step and thoughtful look, along the once magnificent room.

“Alas!” thought he, as his eyes fixed themselves on the spot in the floor, where
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the Knight in black armour had consumed to ashes in a self-kindled fire, “thy predictions, mysterious visitant, have been fully accomplished in the wretched fates of the House of Mirandola.—Those Trans-Alpine unions have indeed, for two generations, destroyed its happiness;—and how shall that tender exotic recover two such tremendous blights?—Will happiness ever again flourish with the fated race of Mirandola?—Or shall the heir of that unfortunate house inherit his full portion of its sufferings?—Hitherto my life had been unmarked by calamity, until the destructive scourge of my family discovered me, and singled me out for the butt of his malice.—Twice already have I escaped the purposed death, but am still the victim of more diabolical malignance; since, in order to ruin the fair promises of happiness held out by mutual love, he will not scruple to blast the fair fame of the departed Hypolita!—Oh! if that injured woman had but survived to do justice to herself and to her son—and—by

Heavens!—how do I know she is really dead?—I will examine her sepulchre—I will see her mouldered corse—I will prove, as far as it admits of proof, that she is really no more;—and perhaps, if indeed she be a saint above, that heaven she inhabits will enable me to clear her fair fame, and establish my own happiness on the foundation of my mother's virtue."

He threw himself at length on the couch, and obtained a short slumber; the beams of the sun, which found their way through some small apertures of the shutters, awoke him again before the two Priests; his sleep, however, had been refreshing, and his visions exhilarating. He went to look at Bertoldo, and found him gradually recovering from the dreadful effects of exanimation, produced by want and hardships. The chains had worn deep furrows in his aged limbs, and his eyes were yet unequal to bear the radiance of the day, to which he had so long been a stranger; but his recollection was perfect, and he would have expressed the
ardour

ardour of his feelings, and his wonder at the events which yet he understood not, but that Sigismond feared to permit him to exert himself, lest he should faint through weakness and fatigue : he therefore recommended to the venerable sufferer to court again the balmy power of sleep ; and returning into the inner room, found Buonafede awaking. That good man arose, and joined his beloved pupil : they walked together up and down the corridor, and talked over the future prospects of Sigismond.

Buonafede could not but see that many of the circumstances that were most for his interest, were cruelly adverse to his love, and he advised him not to hope too ardently for a full completion of all his wishes, since so many reasons must militate against Agnes's acceptance of him ; as she had been, no doubt, strenuously exerting all her vigorous resolution to conquer an attachment which she now thought criminal.

“ That is to say, Father,” interrupted Sigismond, “ that her heart is wholly detached

from

from me.—No reflection, no reasoning whatever can talk down a real passion.—If Agnes ever loved me, she loves me still—if she did not, I have nothing to do but to welcome despair.”

“ My son,” said Buonafede, “ I beseech you, let not such rash determinations seize hold of your mind.—Remember that if Agnes has determined to renounce you, it has cost her many a severe effort, many a dreadful pang ;—nor let it be said, that a being of the softer sex could surpass you in noble fortitude and heroic exertion.”

“ I too,” replied Sigismond, “ could have relinquished Agnes, had she been still my sister ;—but if, that idea abolished, she can from any other cause abandon me, I shall believe she never loved.—What are the claims of a father so lately known, and such a father too, compared with mine, so long established, so rooted in her heart ?”

“ Let us not now, Sigismond,” answered the good Father, “ overcloud our present prospects by forebodings of evil—let us not
meet

meet misfortune more than half way, and, by previous repinings, render ourselves unfit to encounter it ; but let us summon all our fortitude to support with equanimity that splendour we are almost sure of, as well as the disappointment that may be reserved for us."

" I will obey you, my Father," replied the youth ; " but such a disappointment as this will wholly render nugatory all other success."

CHAP. VIII.

“ Where Silence watches the remains of Death ! ”

MERRY.

AS it was yet too early to proceed to the examination of Rezzonico, Sigismond resolved to descend into the vaults, and examine the tomb of his mother. A vague suspicion struck him that some villany might have been practised with her too ; and he thought it right to endeavour to discover, as far as possible, the malpractices of the Prince. He communicated this idea to Father Buonafede, who did not disapprove it ; and summoning Ghiberti, they desired
to

to be conducted to the chapel of the castle, and the burial-place belonging to it.

The former fears of Ghiberti revived, and, under pretence of seeking a torch, he went to fetch Pietro, and desired him to attend the young Signor ; but Sigismond requested that Ghiberti also would go, because he, having been in the castle at the time of the funeral, could more readily point out among the tombs of his ancestors, that belonging to the Lady Hypolita.

Gaining strength from the number of his companions, they descended the stairs (wishing to avoid the inhabited parts of the castle until they burst at once on the confounded Rezzonico), and passed through all those winding subterranean passages, whose loneliness Sigismond had so often encountered alone ; he pointed out the spot where he had been so much endangered by the sudden appearance of Federico, and Pietro, holding the torch to his face, exclaimed—

“ I am sure, Signor, I do not wonder that Federico, whose mind was oppressed

with the remembrance of having murdered the Marquis, should take you for his ghost, for a stronger resemblance never was seen."

"It was then, Pietro," said Sigismond, "Federico who actually murdered my unhappy father?"

"It was, Signor," replied Pietro; "I do not say that Rezzonico disapproved of the act afterwards, but he did not execute it."

"I cannot but rejoice," sighed Sigismond, "that the father of Agnes was spared the actual guilt of murdering mine."

A deep silence ensued; their footsteps echoed along those gloomy vaults, where daylight never entered, and Sigismond could not but forgive the superstitious terrors of the lower order of men, when he felt his own heart impressed with a solemn awe as he gazed on the doors of the dungeons, and remembered how often Murder had been busy there. He at length enquired if these passages would soon bring them to the chapel?

"To the chapel, Signor," replied Pietro, "we are not immediately going, but to the cemetery

cemetery beneath it, from whence we may ascend to the chapel ; but it is long since it has been used."

" The cemetery is what I chiefly wish to examine," replied Sigismond. " You know the way, Pietro ?"

" Perfectly, Signor," answered he.

Again they proceeded in silence, and at length turning off short to the right, their further progress was impeded by a close grated door ; to this, however, they applied their keys in vain, and unwilling to violate the sanctuaries of the dead by forcing or cutting the locks, for this door opened into the cemetery, they were debating who should return for other keys, when Father Buonafede advancing, desired to examine the door, and touching a secret spring, it yielded to the pressure, when Sigismond, with a solemn step, entered the last abode of his ancestors. He beheld the frail memorials of human greatness with a sigh, and felt, as he read the inscriptions that pointed out the " narrow house" of every former Mirandola,

how weak, how vain were those regrets or those exultations, which were so soon to find their proper level here !

“ Yet a little while,” said he softly, “ and I shall be even as my ancestors—I shall sleep in dust, and all the feverish agitations of life will be for ever at an end.—Why then suffer them now so severely to discompose me?—Agnes! though we should be separated on earth, we shall meet for ever in this last abode of frail mortality!—We shall be united in a better world than this, where no murderers come to cut short the thread of felicity !”

He stood musing thus as he gazed on the tomb-stones of the long-forgotten, and his three companions respected his feelings.—Raising his eyes, however, the words, “ Faithful and Firm,” in large letters, attracted his notice, and unfolding his arms, he exclaimed—

“ These moments must not be given to reflection, but to action.—Shew me the Lady Hypolita’s tomb ?”

“ The

“ The reflections which arise from the ashes of the dead, my son,” said Buonafede, “ are never to be neglected ;—they invigorate the soul, and render it more fit for action.”

Pietro now threw the glare of his torch on a tomb-stone, inscribed :—

To the Memory
of
H Y P O L I T A,
Twice married to two successive
MARQUISSES
of
M I R A N D O L A !
Her second Husband, REGINALD,
inconsolable for her loss,
Placed this frail Memorial
to perpetuate
the Remembrance of her
Virtues.

Sigismond shuddered as he read the hateful record, and ordering Pietro to unclofe the door of the fepulchre, he took a torch, and defcended into its marble bofom :—he beheld there a coffin curioufly ornamented, and marked with her name and age, which was no more than nineteen when fhe fell a facrifice to the inhuman perfecutions of the monfter Reginald ;—he lifted up the lid, and perceived only the poor remains of a body that had once been human.—No diftinction now remained ; but among the poor infenfate duft ftill sparkled a ring, which he called Ghiberti to examine.—He was unwilling to remove it from its dufty bed, but Ghiberti thought he well-remembered that topaz to have once sparkled on the Marchionefs's finger.

The duteous youth embalmed the facred duft with his tears, and returning from the fepulchre, threw himfelf into the arms of Buonafede ;—awhile he remained there in fpeechlefs forrow, when they were fuddenly aroused by a trampling of men in the
chapel

chapel above them. Ghiberti, who knew the secret flaircase that led from the cemetery to the chapel, beckoned to Pietro, and they hastily ascended ; and instantly returning, reported that the chapel was adorning gaily as for a marriage ; and Pietro acknowledged that he had heard that the Lady Agnes was that day to be married to Signor Pigliani. This intelligence roused Sigismond from the stupor of his grief, and he exclaimed—

“ There is then no time to lose—let us haste and disappoint these odious nuptials ;—let us burst in thunder on the head of the villain, and rescue Agnes from his power !”

They left the cemetery, and reclosing the door, again retraced, without delay, the winding passages, and regained the upper apartments.

Pietro and Ghiberti were instantly sent to call together the other witnesses, and Buonafede and Sigismond advanced to Zadeski, who, wondering at their long absence, was seated

seated on Bertoldo's bed, watching the fluctuating pulsations of a life so nearly extinguished.—The dying Father had recognized his ancient friend Zadeski, and his wonder and joy strove with each other for the mastery; his curiosity was so extreme, that it was necessary in part to satisfy it, and Zadeski had cautiously explained to him the great business they had undertaken.

Feeble as he was, Bertoldo rejoiced in the intelligence; and Zadeski now prescribing quietness and composure, they adjourned to the corridor, to await the return of Pietro and Ghiberti with Jeronymo.

CHAP. IX.

“Avaunt ! and quit my sight—let the earth hide thee !
“Thy bones are marrowless—thy blood is cold !
“Thou hast no speculation in those eyes
“That thou dost glare with !”

MACBETH.

IT was some time ere Pietro and Ghiberti returned ; and when they did, a look of deep dismay was spread over their features, which instantly communicated itself to the heart of Sigismund, who had scarcely strength to enquire whether Agnes were already married ?

“No, Signor,” replied Pietro, “that ceremony is postponed till to-morrow ; but Jeronymo is gone !”

“Gone !”

“Gone!” exclaimed Buonafede, “whither—how?”

“We know not, Father,” answered Pietro; “but what we have learnt, you shall hear:—Since Jeronymo’s mysterious return hither, he has always been enveloped in a huge wrapping cloak, to guard him from recognition, and has inhabited a chamber over the portal, of the way to which most of the domestics were ignorant; I always conducted him thither at a moment when we were unobserved, and the mystery, thus fortunately preserved, made Jeronymo be looked on in the family as a very extraordinary personage. I had desired him not to leave his room to-day until I came to him, as I had always watched for an opportunity to bring him out when no one was near, and therefore went to the chamber over the portal, quite sure of finding the person I sought; when I arrived there, the door was open—I expressed my wonder at this to Ghiberti, but we paused not a moment;—as we entered the room, a door opposite to us flapped to
and

and fro, and we saw three figures running hastily from us. We did not stop long enough to remark any thing but the wrapping cloak of poor Jeronymo, which was left all in a heap on the ground ; but instantly followed, with our utmost speed, the course we had seen them pursue. We had no leisure to communicate our conjectures ; yet I had no doubt but that Jeronymo had been discovered, and forced away. We frequently saw them in the windings of the passage, which goes through the thickness of the ramparts of the castle, till it opens in various places into other passages, which conduct into the habitable apartments, and into the dungeons, of which there are great numbers in all strong parts of the edifice.— We pursued the fugitives, but they proceeded with equal speed ; and having the start of us, we lost them at last through a door, which we plainly heard fall to after them. When we reached the spot, there were two doors, which completely bewildered us ; we had but one torch—it was therefore impossible to

to separate, and both were firmly fastened, which made us conclude they were caught by spring locks on the other side. Unable to force doors which were of uncommon strength, and having already lost a considerable time, we returned to the portal-chamber in despair, and taking up the wrapping-cloak, from the middle of it fell this paper, addressed to no one :—

“ I abandon for ever an enterprize which can only end in ruin.—Seek not, for you will not find me.”

“ Bursting with rage,” continued Pietro, “ I execrated the fickleness which could make him thus forsake so noble a design at the moment of its birth, and returned hither, hoping to persuade you to pursue it without him.”

“ His evidence,” said Buonafede, “ is material—but we have it in writing.”

“ We

“ We will proceed,” said Zadeski.

“ I could not have believed, nor do I now believe,” exclaimed Sigismond, “ that Jeronymo is unfaithful.—This note has been forced from him—and his caution, in neither signing nor addressing it, proves that he is yet our friend.—We will, however, proceed, and trust that we shall yet save the worthy Jeronymo from the fate that I fear is preparing for him.—Shall we set forward ?”

“ By all means,” said Zadeski ; “ I have the depositions, Sigismond ;—you are worthy of your fortunes—you have judged justly and generously.”

The cheek of the youth glowed at praise so unequivocal from such a man as Zadeski, who seemed to be a fit conductor of so important a business. Reserved and silent, his countenance was stern, and his manners cold ; at the Convent where he had first seen him, Sigismond had felt for him a respect almost amounting to awe, though but a brother of an obscure fraternity.—Rezzonico remembered him not, yet was struck with his coun-

countenance almost to fear ;—but Sigismond felt his alarms subside into veneration when Zadeski paid him his nocturnal visit.—He now seemed, from his previous knowledge of Rezzonico, to be become the arbiter of this important cause ; and he comported himself with a dignity becoming a man who feels his own consequence : he spoke seldom, but always with force ; he rarely praised, but his praise was elevating as his censures were conclusive. Something seemed yet undeveloped in his character and manners—something of reserve, which yet Sigismond feared not—he venerated and confided in Zadeski as in a superior being.

It was agreed that Zadeski should open the accusation, and conduct the business ; he therefore led the way, and followed by Buonafede and Sigismond, by Pietro and Ghiberti, he proceeded along the corridor, and descended the stairs that led to the inhabited part of the castle. As they entered the great hall, Benedetto was crossing it at the opposite end ; and seeing such a train
issue

issue from the deserted apartments, his fears were all awakened, and Sigismond apprehending that the old man would instantly collect the servants, ordered Ghiberti to secure him. Ghiberti obeyed, much to the annoyance of Benedetto, who, having already believed and reported the death of Ghiberti, was convinced that he was thus unwelcomely treated by his ghost only.

When they had reached the parlour where Prince Rezzonico usually passed the day, Zadeski desired Pietro and Ghiberti to retire, until they should be called upon to appear and give their evidence; and when they had withdrawn, he opened the door, and entered the oak-parlour, attended by Sigismond and Buonafede.

The Prince was alone. For a moment he looked not away from some papers he was considering, thinking some of the domestics had entered; when he raised his eyes, they encountered the penetrating ones of Zadeski, and Rezzonico turned pale;—but quickly
recovering

recovering himself, he enquired to what he owed the honour of this visit?

Zadeski replied, in an awful voice—

“To the love of justice!”

“A singular motive to avow,” answered the Prince; “and what justice, my good Father, do you require from me?”

“Justice to every one,” said Zadeski.

“I am willing to do it,” replied the Prince; “if you know wherein I have failed, instruct me in my duty, reverend Father.”

“Trifler,” exclaimed Zadeski, “this levity will avail thee nothing.—Yes, I will teach thee thy duty—instantly quit these usurped possessions, restore to the right heir of Mirandola the wealth and honours of his family, and return to that name thou hast effaced by thy successful crimes—the name of Meilcour.”

“A most extraordinary claim!” answered Rezzonico, assuming an appearance of unconcern; “and pray, holy Father, inform me, from the stores of your universal knowledge, who is the right heir of Mirandola?”

“ This youth,” said Zadeski, pointing to Sigismond.

“ I grant it,” said the Prince; “ but is it usual for the heir to possess while the owner is yet alive?—Myself am Mirandola, and Sigismond is my son.”

“ Infamous liar!” exclaimed Zadeski, indignantly; “ darest thou assert such a falsehood?”

“ Sigismond,” resumed the Prince, “ shall inherit the honours and wealth of his family, but he shall inherit them from the bounty of his father. He is a child of love, and has no claim to any thing.”

“ Oh Heaven!” murmured Sigismond.

Zadeski awed him to silence and firmness by a look, and again addressing the Prince, said—

“ What are thy claims, thou vilest of men—those of rapine, murder, and treachery?—The late Marquis of Mirandola—speak—how died he?”

“ It is well known,” replied the Prince, “ he died by the hands of banditti.”

“ Ruffians

“ Ruffians indeed,” replied Zadeski, “ and where ?”

“ This is not to be borne,” exclaimed Rezzonico ; “ why are these questions ?”

“ Nay, Signor,” replied Zadeski, coolly, “ they must be answered.—Where,” added he, in a voice of thunder, “ where did Mirandola die ?”

“ I scorn my own weakness,” returned the Prince, “ to bear to be thus catechized.”

“ No passion, Meilcour !”

At that name Rezzonico started, and turned pale.

“ Who art thou ?” exclaimed he.

“ One who knows thee, Meilcour,” answered Zadeski ; “ tell me, where died the late Marquis di Mirandola ?”

“ That is also well known,” replied Rezzonico ; “ in the woods near Pontalti.”

“ And there was buried ?” enquired Zadeski.

“ His body could not be found,” answered the Prince ; “ but a cenotaph was there erected to his memory.”

“ His

“ His body is found,” thundered out Zadeski, “ and shall rise up in judgment against thee ;—his heir is found and known—and thou art known.”

“ I am his heir,” resumed the Prince, with an undaunted air, “ who dares contest it ?”

“ I have that here,” returned Zadeski, “ that shall annihilate thy claim.”

“ Impossible !” exclaimed Rezzonico.

“ That we will try,” said Zadeski. “ If you will acknowledge the truth of these accusations, and voluntarily relinquish your ill-gotten honours, perhaps we may dispense with public infamy, however merited ; perhaps, in pity to your daughter, you may be suffered to hide in some cloister your wretched head, and try, by a forced and late assumed penitence, to wear out the remembrance of your former sins ; but free confession and full abdication alone can purchase you this indulgence ; and if you are refractory, public justice shall pursue you to the furthest verge of infamy and disgrace.”

"I scorn your pity," said the Prince, "and reject your offered mercy.—Let me know, or rather let me hear no more.—It is wonderful how I have so long supported such insolence."

"I can explain this wonder, Signor Meilcour," replied Zadeski; "whatever part your pride may take, your conscience condemns you."

"Where are my people?" exclaimed the Prince, in a voice of thunder, "Carucci, Spigno, Benedetto, where are ye?—Where is Vitalba?—where the Count Ubaldo?"

"They shall all be summoned if you please, Meilcour," replied Zadeski, "to witness your confessions.—We wish not to be secret—the whole world, if you will, shall learn your atrocious conduct."

"This insolence is insufferable," cried Rezzonico; "let me pass—I will not be detained!"

"Pardon me, Prince," replied Zadeski, "you must remain here—you quit this apartment no more till all is decided."

"Insolent

“ Insolent Priest!” exclaimed the Prince, “ by what right dost thou detain me?”

“ By the right that Innocence and Justice always have to awe and cow the villain,” answered Zadeski, in a tone of cool contempt.

“ By Heaven!” thundered out the Prince, “ I will no longer bear it.—Summon my people!” and stamping furiously with his foot, Spigno entered.

At the sight of Sigismond, Spigno turned pale; but the Prince commanded him instantly to call the Count Ubaldo, Signor Vitalba, Father Regolo Carucci, and if Pigliani were at leisure, to send him also, and all of his household.

“ You will find Benedetto,” said Zadeski to Spigno, “ in the southern anti-room.”

At this speech Spigno lost all the little remains of colour his former alarm had left him; and Buonafede quitting the room when Spigno left it to obey his master, returned with Ghiberti and Pietro.—At the sight of Pietro, Rezzonico trembled; Pietro

bowed respectfully, and waited in silence the commands of Zadeski.

Zadeski addressed himself to Ghiberti—

“ You know,” said he, “ where those persons are who promised to attend on my bidding ?”

Ghiberti replied in the affirmative.

“ We are going,” resumed Zadeski, “ to proceed to a solemn questioning ;—if there be the least contumacy in yonder villain, summon them instantly, nor wait my farther bidding.”

“ I shall obey,” replied Ghiberti, with respect.

“ Gods !” exclaimed the Prince, “ and to be treated thus by my own menials !”

“ The virtuous,” answered Zadeski, “ are always superior to the guilty.”

At this instant, all those summoned by the Prince entered, except Vitalba, after whom he enquired ;—his own friends professed their ignorance, but Zadeski informed him that Vitalba had carried off the Lady Agnes.

Lowd

At

At this information, agony seized the fine but pallid features of Pigliani, who faintly murmured—

“ That villain ! ”

The Prince was almost convulsed with horror.—Zadeski imposed silence on Sigismond and Buonafede by a look which they dared not disobey. He then addressed those who had lately entered, and whose looks sufficiently declared their surprise.

“ We are convened, Signors,” said Zadeski, “ to hear the full confession of guilt, and to receive the voluntary abdication of a murderer and usurper.—That man, who sits and looks so proudly, is both.—Nay, start not, Meilcour—I am not here to disguise, but to unveil the truth :—thou art both ! ”

“ Suffer not this Priest thus to insult me,” exclaimed the Prince to his friends ; “ silence him, and overpower his party ! ”

The hands of Pigliani and Ubaldo were instantly on their swords ; but, except Spigno, none of the household seemed willing to engage in defence of their master.—Ghiberti,

however, had quitted the room for a minute, and returning, whispered Zadeski, who replied aloud—

“ It is well.—And now, Meilcour,” added he, turning to him, “ will you voluntarily confess to us your sins, and make restitution while yet you can ; or will you submit yourself to the justice of your country ?—Tremble, Meilcour, at the power of those laws thou hast offended.—The Officers of Justice are here, empowered to question thee, and ready to perform their duty.—The depositions of true witnesses are in my hand—of Ghiberti, Pietro, and Jeronymo ; yes, of Jeronymo, though, by some accursed fraud, thou hast dragged him away to sacrifice him to thy vengeance.—Speak, this is the last deliberation allowed thee—this moment thou mayst elude the vengeance of thy country—now thou mayst obtain the mercy of those whom thou hast injured.—Speak, another instant’s contumacy gives thee up to the hands of Justice.”

“ Allow

“ Allow me,” said the Prince, “ a short interval.”

He covered his face with his hands, and remained for some minutes in deep thought; then looking up with one of those indefinable expressions on his countenance which had so often made Sigismond shudder, he said—

“ Let me hear the depositions of the witnesses !”

Zadeski, without answering, took from his pocket a roll of written papers, and with an audible voice, distinctly read the stories related by Jeronymo, Ghiberti, and Pietro. The Prince remained some minutes silent, when a noise was heard in the hall, and Jeronymo rushed in.

“ I have escaped,” he exclaimed, “ and am come to perform my duty !”

“ You shall have no hard task to execute, Jeronymo,” said Meilcour, “ your duty shall soon be plain before you.”

“ No delays !” exclaimed Zadeski.

“ I mean it not,” said Rezzonico ; “ a few minutes’ reflection only.”

“ In this interval the door again opened, and Zadeski was beginning angrily to reprobate such unseasonable interruptions, when the plaintive voice of Agnes exclaimed—

“ What mean these dreadful preparations ?—These Officers of Justice ?—This awful circle ?—Who are these strangers, and why are they here ?”

“ Lady Agnes,” said Buonafede, “ I beseech you to retire—this is no scene for you ;—your tenderness will not be able to support it.”

“ Agnes, my daughter,” cried Rezzonico, “ approach me.”—Agnes obeyed, rushed forward, and bent her knee in duty to her father.—“ Thou art safe then, my child,” said he, “ and where is Vitalba ?”

“ He was wounded,” replied Agnes, “ in the scuffle which rescued me.”

“ And by whom wert thou rescued ?” demanded Rezzonico ?

Agnes hid her face, and replied not.

“ My

“ My child,” resumed the Prince, “ thou art come to witness the disgrace of thy father—thou art all his enemies will leave him.—They accuse him of murder and usurpation—of unjustly detaining from Sigismond his lawful inheritance of Mirandola.—Now mark my words ! and thou, imperious questioner, thou who hast at least so far favoured me as to prove this only blessing, my true and honourable child, hear my full confession.—I own the truth of the crimes acknowledged against me. I employed Federico to waylay and imprison the late Marquis di Mirandola ; and, when in the scuffle to get him to the subterranean vaults, he received his death wound from the hand of Federico, I regretted that any one had robbed me of that pleasure.—But your informers could not tell more than they knew—they could not recount the stolen hours of love I had, during the Marquis’s lifetime, enjoyed with Hypolita—they could not tell that she was going to Pontalti to meet me there—they could not inform you what some papers I

shall direct you where to find, will sufficiently prove;—(and those papers are deposited in a silver casket, in the cenotaph erected at Pontalti to the memory of the unfortunate Henry Sebastian); they will prove what I here swear on the word of a true penitent, that Sigismond is the fruit of those stolen hours of love.—Nay start not, Sigismond; you would require the truth from me, and thus I seal it.”

As he spoke, plunging a dagger (which he always wore) in his bosom, he instantly fell backward senseless, and, as every one thought, dead.—Zadeski exclaimed aloud—

“ He must not die yet.—We have not done with him—preserve him at all events.”

And himself, being skilful in medicine, approached, and examined him; and finding some life yet remained within him, he staunched the freely flowing blood, and applied some healing dressings to the wound; then leaving him to the care of Ghiberti and Pietro, he directed, with an air of authority, that no one who had witnessed this

scene should leave the castle, and commanded the Officers of Justice to guard the doors.

The cavaliers and domestics dispersed, and Sigismond and Agnes claimed the next attention of Zadefki:—Agnes hung fainting over the insensible corse of her father; while Sigismond, long-tortured with indescribable suspense, now felt his hopes for ever crushed: for he dared not doubt an assertion so solemnly confirmed.—Even Buonafede, to whom Rezzonico had related the tale more at large when he demanded and obtained Sigismond, knew not how to disbelieve a circumstance which could be confuted by no proof. Presumption, it is true, was strong against it; but the resemblance of Sigismond to the late Marquis, and the general good character of the Marchioness, though certainly circumstances that militated against the story, yet could not be admitted as evidence in a court of law. He was earnest to have the papers brought from Pontalti; but for this journey six days were necessary, and it was not thought possible that Rezzo-

nico could survive so long.—Zadeski declared them needless, yet offered to send a messenger.

“ They will but prove,” said he, “ what already you are inclined to believe on the attestation of a dying man ;—were they even not to prove it more strongly, who should dare to act in defiance of so solemn a confession ?”

Sigismond groaned from the bottom of his heart.

“ Remember, young man,” said Zadeski, in an awful voice, “ at any rate the blood of Mirandola runs in your veins ; for that miscreant, who avows himself your father, is descended from that noble race he has utterly ruined.—Remember then, Sigismond, the motto of your house.”

Sigismond bowed in silence.

“ It now rests then with us,” continued Zadeski, “ to establish the claim of the Lady Agnes, who, as born in wedlock, will inherit before her brother.”

Father

Father Buonafede, oppressed with agonies nearly equal to those of his beloved Sigismond and Agnes, wondered at the unfeeling fortitude of Zadeski, who spoke of this dreadful consanguinity with all the coolness of an uninterested spectator.

All now had quitted the room except those particularly interested in the event, and Zadeski, opening the door, called for Jeronimo, to whom he spoke in a low voice, and reclosing the door, fastened it to prevent any intrusion.—The daylight was now fading fast away; Rezzonico still continued motionless on the couch, yet there was still life in him, and Zadeski insisted on his being left at peace.

Agnes, thrown on the ground, rested her wretched head on the dead body, as she thought, of her unworthy father; and Sigismond now in mute agony clung to a pillar for support, now paced the chamber with unequal steps;—Buonafede remained in unbroken silence, save that he now and then gave his assent to some remark of Zadeski, who

who alone preserved his fortitude unshaken.

The last remains of daylight disappeared ; the pale moon rising, threw a faint silver radiance over the blue arch of heaven, and cast a feeble lustre through the apartment ; the shadows of the massy pillars fell dark and heavy behind them, and added a strange solemnity to the scene.

At length Zadeski rose, and approaching the dying Rezzonico, found his pulses still throbbed with life, and raising him up, endeavoured to pour a cordial down his throat.

“ Disturb me not !” murmured Rezzonico, in a hollow voice.

“ Oh he yet lives !” cried Agnes ; “ save him, save him !” and she relapsed into her former attitude and insensibility.

Zadeski poured the cordial mixture down his throat, and supported the guilty wretch. A temporary strength was lent him—he rolled his glaring eyeballs around.

“ Where am I ?” he exclaimed ; “ bring light, more light !”

“ Peace,

"Peace, Meilcour," said Zadeski, "exhaust not thyself thus—thou wilt soon want all thy strength."

"Thou art, sure, my evil genius," said Rezzonico; "quit me, quit me!"

"Once more," said Zadeski, "I urge thee to be quiet."

Rezzonico closed his eyes, and in that interval a side door unclosed, and a form, fair, fragile, and graceful, entered, and illumined by the pale radiance of the moon, looked like an inhabitant of heaven. Agnes, insensible, beheld it not; Buonafede gazed in silent wonder, while Sigismond, hid in the shade of the pillars, bent his knee, almost in adoration.—Rezzonico, disturbed once more by Zadeski, opened his reluctant eyes, and fixed them full on the fair apparition.

"Heavenly Powers!" muttered he, "whence art thou?—Thou art come to damn me!—Hence, dreadful being!—Wilt thou not hence?—Oh! I see thee still!"

"What, whom seest thou, Meilcour?" cried Zadeski; "is it that Hypolita with whom

whom thou hast enjoyed so many stolen hours of love?—Speak—claim thy tender bride.”

“ Oh Hypolita !” howled the miserable wretch, “ appal not thus my soul !—Let me die in peace.—Horrible apparition !—I know it is but spirit—it is powerless to hurt me—yet my heart quakes at it.—What wouldst thou ?—Speak !”

“ Justice !” said Hypolita, in a low and solemn voice.

“ How have I injured thee ?” cried Rezzonico ; “ I murdered not thy husband—thy son yet lives.—How have I injured thee ?”

“ Barbarous hypocrite !” cried Hypolita, “ all thou canst now do is to clear my fame. Speak, who is the father of my son ?”

The monster remained silent a moment, then in a voice horrible as the roar of an infernal being, cried—

“ I am !”

“ Inhuman wretch !” exclaimed Zadeski, “ thou hast but few minutes to live—thy
strength

strength ebbs apace—damn not thy soul for ever with so execrable a lie !”

“ Sigismond—is the brother—of—Agnes,” articulated the wretch, with every sign of immediate death. Another cordial was forcibly poured down his throat to retain his life till he should recal so horrible a slander ; but he fell into convulsions, and was for some time unable to speak. Zadeski trembled lest he should die in these agonies, and thus the hopes of Sigismond and Agnes be for ever blasted. He hung over him with watchful attention, counted every throbbing pulsation of his veins, gazed eagerly, as his eyes, without sense or lustre, opened and closed again ; while Sigismond, sensible only to the reiterated avowals that drove him to despair, stood unconsciously gazing on the moon.

The fair form of Hypolita approached the writhing sinner, and the instant returning sense seemed to irradiate his eyes, she said, in a touching and solemn voice—

“ Rezzonico,

“ Rezzonico, on one condition thou hast my pardon—that thou acknowledgest that which thou knowest to be true, that Sigismond is indeed the son of Mirandola.”

He glared horrible and ghastly in her face.

“ Avaunt, horrible spectre !” exclaimed he, “ return to that grave whence thou hast risen to vex me !”

“ Thy falsehood, Meilcour,” exclaimed Zadefki, “ thy falsehood disturbs the repose of the dead.—Acknowledge the truth.”

“ I have already,” cried the wretch, “ nor will I speak again, therefore urge me no more ;” and closing his lips, he remained resolutely silent.—At length, gazing earnestly on Hypolita, he made an effort to reach and grasp her hand ; but she eluded his touch, and he exclaimed, with a laugh of infernal malignance—“ I know thou art alive—I know the view with which thou hast assumed this spiritual character.—I see through all your projects—and shall not I disappoint them all ?—Think not
to

to prevail on Rezzonico to die with a falsehood pressing hard on his soul!—Sigismond is our son!”

Again the monster seemed struggling with the agonies of death; horrible convulsions again writhed his frame, and he howled with torture. Zadeski could scarcely support him, and Buonafede flew to assist.—Hypolita was now near fainting; and Sigismond, who had watched from his obscure post the whole alarming scene, stepped cautiously forward to uphold the fragile form of his mother, whom he now indeed believed an inhabitant of this earth;—he advanced, trembling lest the sight of him should wholly overwhelm her; but it seemed to recal her scattered spirits. She fixed her eyes on him as he approached, and returning strength informed her frame.

“Whence comest thou?” said she, “and who art thou?—Speak instantly!”

“My name,” said he, softly, “is Sigismond;” and he bent his knee, for the first time in his life, in duty to his parent.

“Hast

“Hast thou heard all?” said she.

“I have witnessed the whole,” replied he.

“And thou blushest not to kneel to thy mother?”

“It is my glory, my delight,” said he, in a voice scarcely audible.

“And may that Heaven, to which I trust I am worthy to appeal, bless thee, my son!—Rise, and let me embrace thee!”

For the first time he felt the gentle pressure of a mother’s arms.

“Thou livest indeed,” whispered he; “Oh ecstasy!” and sacred and sublime tears mingled on their cheeks.—His form, his features, his voice, all so fully recalled her murdered husband to her thoughts, that a thousand labouring passions oppressed her soul. The calumnies of Rezzonico were like a dagger to her;—for a moment she pushed Sigismond from her—then again, with exquisite tenderness, drawing him close to her maternal bosom, tears dimmed her eyes,

eyes, while she gazed on him with delight, as the strong moonlight fell on his face.

“ My son—my own *Mirandola* !” exclaimed she, as she grasped him in a close and tender embrace ;—then, as *Rezzonico* again began to revive, she held him forth in speaking silence, one lovely arm encircling his neck, the other extended as shewing him to the monster.

“ It is *Mirandola* himself !” howled he ; “ Oh mercy ! mercy !—*Sigismond* is not my son !—Oh mercy !” and in a long and horrible groan his execrable soul fled from his wounded body.

“ Look up, my *Sigismond*,” cried the enraptured mother, “ look up, my own *Mirandola*—image of my murdered husband, for whom alone I have dared to live thus long, look up, and accept the happiness that courts thee.”

“ He has cleared thy fame,” cried *Zadecki* ; “ with his last breath he has done thee justice, and thus I hail thee, *Mirandola* !”

Again

Again the oppressed youth fell in the arms of his mother, and at length faintly articulated—

“ Angel of light ! all—all is mystery ! ”

“ All shall be explained, dearest Sigismond ;—but now calm thy perturbed spirits, thou avowed heir of Mirandola ;—thou hast no relation to that departed sinner.—Speak, Sigismond, thou dost believe thy mother ? ”

“ Oh Heavens ! ” returned Sigismond, falling on his knees, “ it were sacrilege to doubt thee.”

“ Infernal malice alone,” said Zadeski, “ could prompt the horrid lie ;—thy face, thy form, thy virtuous mother, who for many years has lived my penitent, and who had devoted the remainder of her days to piety—all, all exclaim against the falsehood of that wretch.—No doubt can remain—and all happiness awaits thee, Sigismond.”

“ Who,” said Hypolita, “ is that fainting female ?—Alas ! in the perturbation of the scene I noticed her not.—Is she the Agnes that was called thy sister ? ”

“ She

“ She is,” said Buonafede, “ the lovely, the innocent daughter of that guilty wretch ; or rather, Lady, consider her as the child of thy husband’s sister, and the early beloved of thy only son.”

“ Poor suffering innocent !” said the Lady Hypolita ; “ she shall share my maternal tendernefs.—Heaven has in mercy spared her this last horrible scene—her senses have left her in a happy ignorance, but it is time to relieve her.”

Sigismond flew to her, and finding her really insensible, whom he had thought only oppressed by speechless grief, raised her in his arms, and bore her to the next apartment, whither Hypolita followed ; while Zadeski and Buonafede called in the domestics, and the Priest Regolo Carucci, to perform the last offices to the departed Meilcour. But when they joined the Marchioness, she entreated that some one of trust and fidelity might remain in the apartment, lest new falsehoods should be invented to disturb the happiness which Time might bestow

bestow on the youthful pair.—Zadefski owned the justice and necessity of the precaution, and stationed Jeronymo in the room with the corse.

It was long ere Agnes re-opened her eyes, and then an alarming debility had seized her frame; successive faintings followed each other so quickly, they feared she would die in the struggle. When, after some hours, her sense began to return, she fixed her eyes full on Sigismond, and the sight of him seemed to renew her agonies; she waved him from her with her feeble hand, and hid her face in the compassionate bosom of his mother. Sigismond, struck with despair, feared she had heard too many of the wretch's solemn asseverations of their consanguinity, and that she never would consent to be his. He foresaw only misery in the midst of his splendid successes; for what was all success compared to the possession of Agnes—Agnes, his early love, who had so long embellished all his prospects, to whom all his wishes so long had tended?

At

At length Hypolita addressed him.

“ You must leave us awhile, my son—this suffering innocent cannot support your presence.—Leave me to urge in your absence more than can be said while you remain here.”

Sigismond unwillingly obeyed, and wandered forth alone.—Horrible fantasies possessed his soul, and every hope forsook him. Suddenly, in the crowd of his own feelings, the venerable Bertoldo rushed upon his mind. Eighteen hours had now elapsed since he quitted his chamber, and he was perhaps suffering under a fate as cruel as that from which he had rescued him. He hastily crossed the great hall, and ascended the stairs which led to his ruined chamber, where he found the good Father much recovered: Ghiberti had been careful to supply him with refreshments, and he was now able to converse with Sigismond. Some part of what had taken place he had learned from Ghiberti, whose caution had not been equal to that the others had observed; and the miserable

heir of Mirandola found himself spared the trouble of communicating the chief events of the day.—Bertoldo shewed much joy at beholding the youth, whom now indeed he saw for the first time.

“ Oh undoubted heir of Mirandola !” he exclaimed, “ thy father’s self revives in thee.—Could I have seen thee in my dungeon, I had been able to dissipate all doubts of thy identity.”

“ And yet,” replied Sigismond, “ doubts still remain.—The monster, who is dead, has contrived to embitter all my future life, by sowing the seeds of a dreadful surmise which, though no one believes, must influence the conduct of one being so as to make me wretched.—In short, this murderer has a daughter, who, brought up far from him by her amiable mother, has long been the object of my tenderest love ; and to blast for ever our mutual happiness, he, almost in his dying moments, declared me the fruit of a criminal passion between himself and the Lady Hypolita.”

“ Oh

“ Oh infamous liar !” exclaimed Bertoldo ;
“ but fear not, my son—the Lady Hypolita
could not be guilty of this crime.—Time
may prove what I say ; for my heart fore-
bodes that some great event will arise to
vouch for her innocence.—Do I recollect
aright, is not Zadeski here ?”

“ He is,” said Sigismond ; “ but if, my
good Father, your kind and cautious man-
ner points at a circumstance you may have
known all the while, let me inform you that
I also know it.”

“ That the Marchioness yet lives ?” ask-
ed Bertoldo.

“ I have been in her arms—I have re-
ceived the blessing, the tears, the embrace of
my mother,” said the youth.

“ Then the calumny,” exclaimed Ber-
toldo, “ must be wholly refuted.”

“ No, my Father,” replied Sigismond ;
“ though for a moment the dying wretch
believed my fainted mother what she looked
like, an inhabitant of a better world ; yet,
when he found his error, and even before,

even while he yet thought her a spirit, he persisted in the vile slander; and scarcely could the last faint words, forced from him by terror, dissipate the doubts he had raised."

"Horrible, most atrocious villain!" cried Bertoldo; "but fear not, my son; the truth shall yet appear, and happiness be your own."

"I know not what presentiment of evil," replied the youth, "seems to oppress my soul;—but nothing can revive my fainting spirits, not even my mother's caresses."

"Yield not, my son," replied Bertoldo, "to such gloomy presages.—Thy life has been innocent—nay, it has been actively virtuous.—Thou wilt meet with the reward thy virtues merit; and thou wilt not, by unmanly sorrow, disgrace thy noble House."

"Alas!" answered Sigismond, "I know that I ought not to yield to these suggestions;—no one ever had more occasion to support himself by the remembrance of our maxim, nor more difficulty in adhering to it.
Well

Well might Father Buonafede in early youth inculcate it ;—and hard indeed have I found it, through all my trials, to remain faithful and firm.

CHAP. X.

- “ Never ;—this orphan, this abandon’d wanderer,
“ Taunted with infamy, with shameful origin,
“ Dower’d with no lot but scorn, shall ne’er bestow
“ That, her sole portion, or a lordly husband !”

WALPOLE.

IN the meanwhile the Marchioness and the good Buonafede gave all their cares to the enfeebled and miserable Agnes ; her weakness long baffled all their endeavours, and her horrors controuled all their kind at-

tempts to compose her spirits; she talked wildly, and was utterly incapable of listening to reason. In vain the Lady Hypolita strove to make her comprehend that the last words of her father had revoked his former cruel assertions. She could alone weep and rave, till at length they agreed only to sooth her perturbed spirits, and defer all explanation till her reason should be more able to support it. At length, subdued by the maternal tenderness she received, her gentle heart vented itself in a flood of soft and salutary tears; not such as during her ravings had gushed from her burning eyes, but a quiet and healing shower, like those which, during a fervid summer, the dark clouds of evening sprinkle on the parched bosom of the earth.

She cast her dewy eyes on the Marchioness, who, seeing in her delicate form a perfect resemblance to that Agnes di Mirandola she well remembered, strained her with fondness to her bosom, and sent a silent prayer to Heaven for her felicity.—Overpowered with
her

her sufferings, the exhausted Agnes sunk into a slumber, which they hoped would completely heal her harassed spirits; and the Lady Hypolita conversed in a low voice with Father Buonafede.

He was anxious to know how she had been preserved so long in such absolute secrecy, and she related her simple narrative in the following terms:—

“ After I had entrusted Nerina and Jeronymo with the care of my son, I was tempted to repent that I had not kept them with me, since the increasing persecutions of Meilcour made it necessary for me to attempt to escape; and the assistance of those two faithful servants was almost necessary to me. I regretted too that I had abandoned my only son, the heir of a noble house, to a stranger; for I knew you, reverend Father, only from the report of Nerina, and though I am now convinced that I could not have made a better choice, yet it was not unnatural that a mother’s bosom should harbour such fears. However, these apprehensions

for my infant were soon lost in nearer terrors for myself. The day was fixed for my forced marriage with the murderer of my husband, nor was I even positively informed that the Marquis was dead ; but the inhuman Reginald tauntingly assured me he would never come to trouble our joys : at the same time he told me that every one believed I had long loved him, and had not scrupled to yield to him what I ought to have reserved for my husband.—Little did I foresee the diabolical plan which, even then, the wretch had conceived.—Good Father Bertoldo was then Confessor to the family—he, doubtless, long since sleeps in dust.”

“ No,” said Buonafede, “ he yet survives.”

“ Myſterious Heaven, I thank thee !” ejaculated the Marchionefs ; “ my innocence may then yet be eſtabliſhed.—But to proceed :—With him I concerted the means to eſcape, and he ſummoned a Prieſt, whom I recognize here in Father Zadeſki, who ſwore he had ſolemnized legal nuptials between

tween Rezzonico and the Lady Agnes di Mirandola, who was wholly lost to all enquiries that had been made for her.—We debated whether it was not absolutely our duty to bring the wretch to legal justice; but the state of the country was then such that justice could scarcely be administered: the whole nation was distracted with civil wars, and the powerful trampled with impunity upon laws which they broke without scruple. Meilcour was established in the honours and possessions of Mirandola, and we determined, contrary to the advice of Zadeski, to preserve the secret for the present, and to escape known.—We had but few followers, and no power or money to command more. Meilcour was absolute master within the walls of Voltorno, and the least suspicion of an intention to deliver him up to the justice of his country, would have cost us all our lives. I therefore, with much difficulty and danger, effected my escape with Zadeski, who lodged me in a Convent, where I have ever since remained.

He dwelt in a monastery near me, and with him I have at times enjoyed the melancholy pleasure of talking over my former sufferings. It may easily be imagined that my earliest care, when I found myself in security, was to enquire for my son; but not knowing precisely the situation of Father Buonafede's residence, I sent secretly to Voltorno a messenger whom I could depend upon, to learn from Nerina and Jeronymo whether they had left him in safety. My messenger returned disconsolate: he related that Nerina and Jeronymo had both quitted the castle; but that, on his enquiries after them, he had been mysteriously informed by one of the domestics, who took him aside from the others, and appeared to have been in their confidence, that they had witnessed the death of the infant.—My trusty messenger, dissatisfied with this account, took considerable pains to ascertain the truth; but as equal, or rather superior art was employed to conceal it from him, all his endeavours served only to confirm the first account, and to plunge

plunge me into absolute despair.—It is now some months since he appeared, one day when he came to visit me, labouring with some important secret ; even his strength of mind, and no man possesses more, could not conceal it. I questioned him, and he acknowledged that a most extraordinary circumstance had discomposed him.—‘ You well remember, Lady,’ said he, ‘ the event of our enquiries after your son ?’—‘ Alas !’ replied I, ‘ can a mother forget the circumstances which proved to her she had lost her only child.’—‘ Be comforted,’ replied he, ‘ we may have been deceived—it is possible Sigismond may live.’—‘ He does live,’ exclaimed I.—‘ You would not give me this hope if you could not confirm it.’—‘ He does live,’ returned Zadeski, ‘ and I have seen him.—The time is now pregnant with great events ; we may be called upon to give evidence soon on some important points ; hold yourself in readiness, Lady, and preserve your fortitude.’—Lost in an ecstasy I cannot describe, I suffered him to depart without having asked

the innumerable questions I longed to have resolved ; but I was obliged to devour my curiosity, for Zadeski came to me no more, and I had no one to speak to. I afterwards received his directions to put myself under the care of the messenger he had sent me, whom I found to be my faithful Jeronymo, whom I had also been made to believe was no more. He conducted me, by easy journeys, to the cottage of his wife, Nerina, where I saw Zadeski, and the circumstances of the present moment were explained to me. It was thought that my sudden appearance would perhaps force the truth from the monster, and I consented to see once more the murderer of my husband.—The rest you know, good Father, and must assist my endeavours to make it all terminate happily for these dear children.—If Bertoldo lives, I shall hope much from the effect of his testimony on the heart of Agnes.”

“ Alas !” replied Buonafede, “ he lives ; but he has so suffered under the tyranny of the wretch who is gone, that I fear he will
be

be incompetent to aid you; not that any doubt can remain which his testimony would be necessary to clear.—Who can see you, and doubt for an instant?—Not, surely, the ingenuous heart of Agnes.”

They continued occasionally speaking in a low voice, while Agnes still slumbered.—The night had given place to the early dawn ere she awoke, and the first beams of the sun met her unclosing eyes; her countenance was calm, though pallid; the agonies of the preceding night had subsided, and a total debility had succeeded; yet she spoke with coherence and tranquillity, and thanking the Marchioness for her maternal cares, feared she should suffer by them.

Delighted to see her so composed, the Marchioness strained her to her bosom, and in the fondness of the moment, called her dear daughter.—Agnes, at the word, thrunk from her embrace, and desired to be allowed to meditate awhile.

The Marchioness and Father Buonafede withdrew to a distant window, while the
poor

poor sufferer lay on the couch, lost in thought; at length she threw herself upon her knees, and offered up her prayers for strength of mind and composure of spirits, and then feebly advancing to them, she took a hand of each, and tears flowed from her eyes; they gave her a seat, and waited her speaking.

“ Let me—Oh how shall I explain myself?” sobbed she.

“ Dearest Agnes,” said the Marchioness, “ let me speak—let me clear away all your doubts?”

“ I have none,” interrupted Agnes; “ is it possible to doubt you?—You are an angel.—But what—Oh what was my father?”

“ Sweetest girl, think not of that.”

“ But I do—I must think of it,” exclaimed Agnes, “ and never will I contaminate the noble race of Mirandola by uniting to it the offspring of falsehood, murder, and treachery.”

“ If you value the House of Mirandola, Agnes,” resumed the Marchioness, “ you
will

will remember that its existence rests wholly with you.—My son will never survive——”

“ Hush !” said Agnes, “ interest not my passions ;—Reason ought here to decide, and when her will is known, we should be faithful and firm.”

“ Dearest Agnes,” said Buonafede, “ this is not the moment for decision ;—your reason is now clouded over by ten thousand contrary emotions ; suspend your decision till your health and strength are re-established, and then——”

“ My decision is made, Father,” replied Agnes ; “ I will never be the wife of the Marquis of Mirandola.—When I can see him with proper feelings, I will tell him so myself ;—but not now—I am now unequal to the attempt.—Let him not approach me.”

“ He shall not,” said the Lady Hypolita ; “ but when you are stronger, Agnes, we will discuss this point calmly.—Promise me one thing.”

“ What is that ?” said Agnes.

“ To

“ To bind yourself,” replied the Marchioness, “ by no irrevocable vows.—If, on mature discussion, we abandon all hopes of this union, we will submit, and it will be time enough then to ratify the decision by a vow. Promise me this, Agnes.—You do not speak.”

“ I promise all you require,” sighed Agnes; “ and now, Lady, seek your son. Your kindness to a wretch like me, has too long detained you from your maternal enjoyments.—Hasten to him, and bid him forget, in the arms of a virtuous and angelic mother, that there exists such a being as the wretched Agnes.”

The Lady Hypolita embraced her with the tenderest affection, and trusted that when time had a little blunted her extreme sensibility to the crimes of her father, she would be prevailed upon to listen to the pleadings of love. She then went to seek her son, leaving the venerable Buonafede to soothe the still disturbed mind of the unfortunate Agnes. The consciousness of her
own

own disgrace had taken deep hold of her, and she rejoiced that her mother had not lived to see this woeful explanation of the crimes of Meilcour.

The good Father tried to lead her thoughts to other considerations, but nothing could for a moment engage her attention but the terrible death and confession of her father ; then shuddering, she exclaimed—

“ And shall the child of so sinful a being pollute the House of Mirandola, by uniting herself to its sole support?—Oh never, never!—The sins of my father would call down a judgment upon me, and entail misery on the whole race.—No, Sigismond, thou mayst suffer from the disappointment of thy youthful passion, but not through my weakness shalt thou suffer in thy posterity.—The traditions of thy House have foretold misery, in consequence of an alliance beyond the Alps: my unfortunate mother was united to a man of French extraction, and the union was performed beyond the Alps; and sufficiently have we seen the tradition

dition verified ;—and shall I, with so dreadful an example before my eyes, run headlong into the same error, and perpetuate to this hapless house the evils attendant on an alliance with foreign blood ?”

“ My daughter,” interposed Buonafede, “ you forget that you are as much a descendant of the House of Mirandola, as of Meilcour ;—the same blood flows in your veins that animates those of Sigismond ; and the virtues of your mother more than counterbalance the crimes of your father.—Sin is the portion of frail human nature ; but virtue, such as her’s, is almost beyond mortality.”

“ Alas ! Father,” replied Agnes, “ my treacherous heart, even in these moments of acute sorrow, is but too ready to set forth to view all the arguments in favour of Sigismond ; but no sooner does my fancy yield for an instant to the pleasing suggestion, than some horrible reflection arises, and in a moment overclouds the imaginary sunshine.—I look forward to future years ; I see

Discord

Discord shaking her firebrands amongst my children—I see Suspicion, Hatred, and Revenge scattering poison over all objects—and I see my Sigismond reproaching me as the cause of all this misery.—I see, perhaps, a murderer glaring horrible among my offspring;—and surely, Father, it is better to listen to these prophetic feelings, and for ever refuse the transient happiness offered me, than risk the failure of it in after times, when I should be an object of no one's pity, and of disgust and hatred to my Sigismond.”

“ Daughter,” resumed the good Father, “ you will exhaust yourself; and besides are not keeping your word with the Marchioness. Endeavour to banish these afflicting thoughts, and to bring back your mind to its natural tone.—In illness, or strong agitation of spirits, the soul, enervated by its frail companion, is not equal to discuss, with sufficient calmness and equanimity, a question which comprises its dearest interests.—I could with ease answer your arguments, and I think confute them; but I will

will not at this moment occasion you so much agitation."

"My good Father," replied Agnes, "I cannot detach my mind from a subject so important, and therefore I rather think it relieves it to unburden myself of the ideas that oppress me.—I am forming no irrevocable decision, though I own my wishes point me to a cloister, as the only possible chance of regaining my peace."

While the Lady Agnes yet spoke, a tap at the door solicited permission to enter, and Lauretta, having obtained it, requested leave for Signor Pigliani to visit the Lady Agnes. Father Buonafede, who trembled for the consequences of agitating her, would have refused it; but Agnes exclaimed—

"I owe much to Signor Pigliani—I would wish to see him. Tell him I will receive his visit as a favour."

Lauretta withdrew; and indeed Agnes forbade her attendance: she suspected her too strongly of treachery in the affair of Signor Vitalba, to behold her without uneasiness.

Pigliani

Pigliani was not long ere he followed his messenger: he started when he beheld the ravages a few hours only had made in the delicate form of the Lady Agnes, and approaching her with respect, felt inclined to bend his knee before a being so nearly approaching to spiritual. She endeavoured to smile on him; but the too ready tear checked the attempt, and she wept in silence.—He respected her sorrow, and after an interval he said—

“ Fairest Lady Agnes, I come to solicit your pardon for all the uneasiness you have suffered on my account, and to assure you that you shall suffer no more.—That I have loved you—that I do love you with a passion fervid and sincere as ever warmed the heart of man, I trust I need not assert; but believe me when I declare, that that passion should never have led me to persecute you, but that I knew it was decided that you should make your election; and I flattered myself, pardon my vanity, that with me you would be less wretched than with my rival.

But

But let me obtain your pardon for what is past, as I here solemnly swear to molest you no more with a tenderness so offensive."

"Signor Pigliani," said Agnes, "you have my pardon—and not that alone, but my thanks for the many instances of delicate attention you have shewed me;—the promise you have now voluntarily made, demands my warmest gratitude; for indeed, if I know my own heart, it will never more admit a thought of love."

"Ah loveliest Agnes," cried the Signor, "I trust you are not in earnest! Your prospects are now such as promise you future felicity and peace; and it is my fervent wish that all your days may be crowned with that happiness you so well deserve.—Your lover is justly raised to the highest pitch of honour and worldly prosperity, of which he has proved himself worthy by his noble conduct while Fortune frowned upon him.—The terrible doubts, so inhumanly raised, are for ever done away—they cannot exist in one generous bosom; and it rests with the Lady
Agnes

Agnes to atone to the Marquis di Mirandola for the wrongs he has suffered."

Father Buonafede, observing that the Lady Agnes was so affected by the ideas Pigliani had excited, that she was unable to answer, enquired if any thing fresh had occurred, or what was become of Signor Vitalba?"

"Alas!" replied Pigliani, "Signor Vitalba has acted a part the most ungenerous. The young Marquis went to visit him in his prison, where he was merely confined, not chained, and was conversing with him on the subject of the late events, when suddenly, with a diabolical malignance, he aimed a blow at the Marquis with a concealed filetto; fortunately Zadeski, who was present, had seen the attempt, and seizing his arm, had prevented him from succeeding in his intention. He was immediately secured, and the filetto taken from him, which, on examination, proved to have been dipped in a poison so subtle, that, had he effected the smallest rasure of the skin, the
wound

wound must have been fatal; but Providence, by its minister, Zadeski, preserved the Marquis for a happier fate," and Pigliani bowed to the Lady Agnes.

"I rejoice," said Agnes, with all the fortitude she could assume, "to hear of the Marquis's safety;—and to you, Signor Pigliani, I shall hold myself for ever indebted—you will ever share my best wishes for your permanent happiness;—and perhaps there will come a time when my mind will have sufficiently recovered its natural composure to allow me to say I shall always see you with pleasure. At present, the distressing events that have so rapidly occurred, render me unequal to see even those to whom I am most obliged; and for a time, at least, a Convent must be my refuge, until I can regain the power of abstracting my mind from a constant attention to its misery."

"That period, Lady Agnes," said Pigliani, "will soon arrive;—you have not merited to meet misfortune, and the pressure of sorrow, not incurred by offences, is
light

light indeed. Your natural candour sets you above any artificial appearances of regret where no regret was due;—and allow me to add, as a proof how much a real passion can ameliorate the heart, that I rejoice in the liberty you have regained, though I thereby lose my only hope of obtaining the possession of your hand;—but indeed, Lady Agnes, though my inmost soul adored you, my heart bled at the persecutions you suffered, and I wished to obtain your preference, when your real tenderness seemed to be crushed for ever, that I might have it in my power to protect you from molestation, and to prove to you how completely I would leave you mistress of yourself.”

“ Signor,” replied Agnes, “ I never till now knew the full merits of your character; but excuse my expressing what I feel, and allow me to ask what are your future projects?”

“ Perhaps, Lady, they are such as you will scarcely approve; yet I dare assure you they are not dishonourable.—You perhaps

recollect the earnest conversation I held with the leader of the banditti we fell in with; he was tired and ashamed of the life he then led, yet alone knew not how to disentangle himself; we talked over a pursuit, which seemed to lead to glory and independence, and which would have fully caught my active soul, had not my views then pointed very differently. He spoke of his men as brave and generous, and completely under his guidance; and, could he be joined by a cavalier of honour, he proposed to assemble more men, and form a martial troop, which in these times, when Italy is threatened with a long continuance of the intestine convulsions that have so long torn her to pieces, would ensure respect from his enemies, and might be serviceable to his friends. My present intention is to return to Signor Perezzi, and join myself to him; war will engage a mind at present too much occupied by its own far different feelings, and if I should fall in battle, I shall but terminate, rather prema-

prematurely, a career which promises me no blessings that can interest my heart."

"Farewel then, Signor!" answered Agnes; "may your virtuous pursuits be crowned with honour and success! and be assured my gratitude and good wishes will always follow you."

"Ere I leave you, Lady Agnes, near whom my reluctant soul still lingers," said he, "is there no service that I can render you here?—Valenti is still incapable of asserting his claim; but his father, Count Ubaldo, talks of enforcing the acknowledged intentions of one who claimed a right to controul you;—cannot I, by staying here, assist in repressing his vehemence?—I, who hoped to have devoted my whole life to you, could not be so happily employed as in your service."

"Once more, Signor," replied Agnes, "I must repeat my warmest thanks;—but when you have heard my present intentions, you will see that I cannot need your generous interference:—I mean, Signor, to make

over all the property I am to inherit, which I am told is considerable (independent of the wealth of Mirandola) to one who has already been injured past atonement, reserving only enough to support me in that religious seclusion to which I mean to devote myself. If I persist in this intention, the Count, who seeks a wealthy bride for Signor Valenti, will think no more of me."

"Heaven forbid," replied Pigliani, "that you should persist in this intention—but may you chuse a more powerful and more acceptable protector than myself! Only allow me to add, Lady Agnes, that wherever I am, or at whatever moment you may hereafter stand in need of a zealous and active friend, I shall be most proud to be summoned to your service." And imprinting one fervid kiss on the pale hand she gave him, Signor Pigliani departed.

The fortitude Agnes had with much difficulty preserved during so painful an interview, now wholly forsook her, and she threw herself on the couch, and wept bitterly.

Father

Father Buonafede saw and respected her distress, and forbore to disturb her ; she even moved not when the Lady Hypolita entered her apartment, to whom the good Father communicated the trying scene that had just occurred, and spoke highly of her exertions. The Marchioness wished him to go to her son, who was anxious to hear of the state of her mind, and she would in the interval remain with Agnes. Buonafede, who longed to congratulate his beloved pupil on his recent escape from the filetto of Vitalba, readily obeyed the Marchioness, who watched with the tenderest anxiety beside the couch of Agnes.

CHAP. XI.

“ Now, by Heaven! I feel
“ Beyond all emens, that within my heart
“ Which marshals me to conquest—something here
“ That snatches me beyond all mortal fears !”

MASON.

WHEN Buonafede joined his pupil, Sigismond enquired into every particular of Agnes's feelings, and the holy Father could not deny but she seemed most decidedly averse to any thoughts of an union with him ; religious seclusion seemed alone to absorb all her wishes, and he recounted to the young Marquis the arguments she used against admitting any thoughts of love.

The

The poor youth, who could admit no idea of any felicity that was not built on the possession of Agnes, combatted these arguments with all his powers, yet seemed cruelly alarmed by the coolness and readiness with which she arranged her ideas; it appeared impossible to him to reason with so much fluency, except where the feelings prompted, and he feared that the thoughts which she urged had, in fact, made their full impression on her mind, and that in her fears of the consequences, she had lost all wish to indulge her love.

“The strong effort she made,” exclaimed he, “to conquer her attachment when she feared it was placed on a brother, has no doubt succeeded, and she has actually triumphed over a passion that is entwisted with every fibre of my heart.—Alas! my Father, I thought it had been impossible so suddenly to subdue a real love!”

“You can hardly judge, my son,” replied Buonafede, “of the permanent state of her mind, by the strong expression of her feel-

ings at a crisis like the present.—Events of such magnitude and blackness have so rapidly succeeded each other, that she is not now able to develope her own heart, nor to distinguish between the impressions of despondency and the dictates of reason.—Let a little while pass ere we attempt to form a decisive opinion of what is likely to ensue. Oppressed as she is with the newly discovered infamy, and the horrible death of her father, can you wonder that she considers herself as a partaker in his guilt?—But be assured, the caution with which she avoids your name, is far from a symptom that she has subdued her attachment.—I fear more from the harassed state of her health and spirits, than from any failure in her love.”

“ Alas! my Father,” exclaimed Sigismond, “ if, after all, I am to lose her—Oh rather let her cease to love me, than cease to live!—I cannot support the idea of her falling a victim to the infernal wickedness of her father.”

Unable

Unable to give his attention to any subject but the immediate concerns of his love, the Marquis thought it an unwelcome intrusion when Father Zadeski entered, and desired him to attend in the chamber where Valenti was confined, as the Count Ubaldo threatened to pursue legal means to force the Lady Agnes to obey the will of her late father—

“And pretends,” added Zadeski, “that he has in his possession a paper, written by the hand of Rezzonico, in which he commits his daughter and her estates to his guardianship, and that this paper is executed with all legal forms.—If this be the case, we may still have some trouble with the Count and his son, who has none of the natural generosity of youth about him, and can be wrought on by no means to relinquish what he has it in his power to obtain.”

“And if such a paper exists,” replied Sigismond, “how can we controul it?”

“Let us at least,” answered Zadeski, “examine the affair—it may not be so bad

as it is represented to me. The circumstance that most troubles me is, that Spigno, who has so long been in the confidence of the monster Reginald, is now the privy counsellor of Ubaldo.—But come, Sigismond, while you hesitate, your enemies are strengthening themselves, and contriving new plots against you.”

Sigismond shook off his reluctance, and, accompanied by Buonafede, attended Zadeski to the chamber of Valenti. As they entered, they heard high words, and stopped awhile in the anti-chamber: the voice of Spigno was high in complaint, and Zadeski having accidentally distinguished some words, boldly rushed in.

“ Give me the contested paper!” exclaimed he; “ Spigno, thou art so deep a villain, it signifies little to thee whether thou art paid for acting on the side of Justice or of Vice; give me the paper, and thou shalt not lose thy reward.”

Spigno,

Spigno, awed by the address of Zadeski, was going to obey, when Count Ubaldo rushed forward, and tore it from him.

“It is a forgery,” exclaimed Spigno; “I will atone, by my present conduct, for my former villany.—It is a forgery; and though my late master, Prince Rezzonico, suffered your son to become a candidate for the hand of the Lady Agnes, his full intention was in favour of Signor Pigliani, and I can prove my words.”

“Prove them,” exclaimed Ubaldo; “I possess the last will of the Prince; in which he gives to me the guardianship of his daughter, and recommends it to me to give her a filial claim to my care and attention.”

“Hold,” said Zadeski, “let me ask a question:—Is it not of the wealthy heiress of Rezzonico you claim the guardianship?”

“Undoubtedly,” replied Ubaldo.

“Then learn from me,” resumed Zadeski, “that all the inheritance of Rezzonico returns to the right heirs of the family.—The false proceedings by which the late Reginald

de Meilcour obtained possession of that wealth, has been fully developed; the attainder is reversed, and the estates are restored."

"We shall examine this," said Ubaldo, "and, if this be true, we shall relinquish to those who will have her, the heiress of Reginald's infamy.—I suppose the new Marquis will not be withheld from espousing her, by the founded reports of their near consanguinity?—But I will not blindly take on your report, most reverend Father, this quickly coined intelligence respecting the inheritance of Rezzonico."

"I do not wish you should," replied Zadeski; "the more enquiries you make, the more will my truth be proved. The late Prince Rezzonico, who was imprisoned by the treacherous contrivances of Reginald, had employed many powerful friends to prove his innocence; and had just succeeded, and would in a very few days have claimed possession of his own estates, but that a sudden illness took him off in prison. His
son

son has procured the attainder to be reversed ; and, as the Marquis is already in possession of the Mirandola inheritance, nothing will remain to Agnes but the name of Meilcour."

" We shall see," answered Ubaldo ; " this tale is ingenious and coherent, but it will not obtain our implicit faith."

Spigno now addressed Ubaldo.

" Signor Count," said he, " I wonder this intelligence should appear so incredible to you, when I have already orders, under your own hand, to waylay and murder the cavalier who claims the fortunes of Rezzonico.—You certainly gave not these orders against a shadow."

Ubaldo turned pale ; and the rage of Valenti, who had hitherto been silent, was terrible.—Zadeski, with a look of cool contempt at the plotting Count, turned round to Mirandola, and said, with an air of satisfaction—

" We shall have then, my dear Marquis, no further trouble here.—I shall consign the Count and his son to the care of the Officers
of

of Justice, who are not yet gone ; and Spigno has it now in his choice to give full evidence of all he knows, or to share their confinement and fate."

"Nay," said Spigno, "I have, it is true, been all my life a rascal, and I believe it is so natural to me, I shall find it difficult to reform ; however I will make the attempt, and am ready, when called upon, to make a full disclosure of all I know."

Zadeski seemed willing to accept his penitence, and left him as a guard over the Count and the Chevalier Valenti ; but for once the forethought of Zadeski failed him, for no sooner was Spigno left alone with his late friends, than he contrived and effected their escape, which he shared ; thus putting an end to all further trouble on their account, to the satisfaction of the young Marquis, who was tired of scrutinizing into the vices of mankind. One only idea had taken possession of him ; and while he remained in uncertainty about the Lady Agnes's final decision, that suspense absorbed all

all other feelings. In vain he reflected on every particular, recalled every word he had heard her utter, or that had been repeated to him ; he could not help flattering himself one moment that she would at last relent, and be biaſſed by the perſuaſions of all his friends to accept him ; nor the next, relapſing into abſolute deſpair. Father Buonaſede was obliged to exert all the ſway he had ſo long exerciſed over the mind of Sigifmond, to aſſiſt him now to preſerve any equanimity ; and Zadeſki continually reminded him not to derogate from the eſta- bliſhed principles of his Houſe. At length his agitation became too great to allow him to remain any longer at a diſtance from her, and he approached the chamber where ſhe had paſſed the night ;—the day was now far advanced, and he felt unequal to another night of ſuch ſuſpenſe as the laſt.

“ And yet, my ſon,” ſaid Buonaſede, “ you can ſcarcely expect, in the preſent ſtate of the Lady Agnes’s feelings, that ſhe can come to a ſpeedy deciſion on ſo important

a point ;—undoubtedly, if you now hurry her to make an irrevocable declaration of her intentions, they will be unfavourable to you. Time alone can work that change in her heart, which shall enable her to act according to her former tenderness.—Can she, do you think, instantly give her hand to the man who has published the infamy of her father, and pursued him even to death ?”

“ Alas !” replied Sigismond, “ the more time she has to reflect on this, while I am prevented from pouring into her ears the soft persuasions of love, the more she will harden her heart against me—the more odious I shall become in her eyes.—Go to her, Father Buonafede, I beseech you go to her, and persuade her to see me—to let me hear, from her own lips, that she wishes my absence—wishes never to see me more !”

“ And do you think, Sigismond,” answered Buonafede, “ that your cause is in the hands of an unskilful or inattentive advocate ? Is not your mother, the excellent Lady Hypolita, with her ; and will not she, think
you,

you, watch every favourable opportunity to plead the wishes of a son so dear?"

"I fear," replied the young Marquis, "I fear I am unreasonable;—but indeed, my dear and venerable benefactor, the temporal successes I have experienced are of no avail to my happiness, unless I can persuade the Lady Agnes to share them with me."

Again he repeated his solicitations to Father Buonafede to enter the apartment, and promised to remain with Zadeski in the great hall. Here the admonitions of Zadeski, whose stern character impressed him with more awe than the feeling and affectionate Buonafede, restored his mind to a more nervous manliness, and he promised to await the issue with composure and calmness.—The good Father remained not long in the room.

"She yet sleeps," said he; "she has enjoyed some hours of tranquil and refreshing repose. Come in for a moment, and behold her innocent countenance, and let its
calmness

calmness sooth the perturbations of your bosom."

Sigismond and Zadeski both, with noiseless steps, approached the room, and gazed with admiration on the lovely sweetness of her looks: a half-smile sat upon her lips, and a vermeil glow, like the hue of the early morning, embellished her delicate cheek; one arm supported her head, and was almost hid by her shining tresses; the other hung carelessly down, nor could Sigismond forbear imprinting on the snowy hand one gentle kiss. Still she slept, and the Lady Hypolita contemplated her slumbers with maternal tenderness;—in vain she requested her beloved son to leave the room, lest the fair invalid should wake, and the agitation of seeing him should more than counterbalance the benefits of her quiet repose. He knelt beside the couch, and grasping his mother's hands, seemed unable to move; at length the voice of Zadeski roused him to exertion, and he was preparing to rise, when the faint voice of Lady Agnes arrested him.

" I

“ I have been happy,” said she ; “ I have seen my mother, and my spirits are calmed.”

Ere yet she perceived him, Sigismond, with quiet steps, retreated out of sight, and Zadeski left the room. The Marchioness spoke to her, and the poor sufferer answered her in a voice of affection that forced tears from the eyes of Buonafede. At length Agnes perceived her venerable friend ; she held out her hand to him with a look of tender respect—

“ My Father,” said she, “ your presence comforts me.—Tell me, may I ask, where—how is Sigismond ?”

“ Ask all you please, dear Agnes,” replied the Father ; “ Sigismond is well, but most anxious——”

“ I think,” said she, “ I could bear to see him while yet my mother’s voice sounds in my ears—‘ Agnes,’ said she to me, ‘ Sigismond is the son of my love ; drive him not to despair, my child.’—Yet I know not how, even though this fancied command corresponds with the advice of this dear lady, and with
your’s,

your's, my Father—I know not how to forget at once all the reasons against——”

“ See him, however,” said the Marchioness, “ see my son, dearest Agnes, and try to obey the voice of your mother—of both your mothers.”

Agnes pressed the hand of the Marchioness to her lips, and Buonafede led Sigismond forward. He knelt by the side of the couch—he fixed his earnest eyes on her blushing face, and not venturing to speak, awaited in earnest expectation the first accents of her voice ;—what he had heard, had almost suspended his faculties ; and Agnes, suffering under his gaze, hid her face in the Marchioness's bosom.

“ Speak to him, Agnes,” said the Marchioness, “ confirm the hopes you have raised.”

“ She is mine—she is mine !” exclaimed Sigismond, and threw his arms around her. She shrunk, however, from his ardent embrace, and wept copiously.

“ Alas !”

“ Alas !” said she, at length, “ I am unable to judge.—The doubts so artfully raised, though they are for ever annihilated, yet oppress my spirits ;—the consciousness of my infamy, and the cruel events that have so rapidly succeeded each other, seem to throw an eternal barrier——”

“ Think not so deeply of these things, my daughter,” said the Marchioness, “ the remembrance of the crimes of others attaches not to you ;—the doubts, which you own are annihilated, it is needless to combat.—There remains then only the simple question, Do you—can you still love my son ?”

The entrance of Father Zadeski here for awhile postponed the necessity of an answer.

“ I have been witnessing,” said he, “ a horrible scene—the last moments of the murderer Federico.—His deposition fully confirms all our wishes, and had the smallest shadow of a doubt remained, establishes the birth of Sigismond on the surest foundation. He declares that no doubt ever for a moment existed ; that the whole household

hold knew too well the virtuous demeanour of the Lady Marchioness, to entertain the smallest idea that Sigismond was not the son of the Marquis he so strikingly resembles.—For Vitalba, he has declared his intention to enter a monastery, and thereby to evince the sincerity of his resolution no more to molest the Lady Agnes with a passion, which he declares was sincere and honest, though he had no hope of success but from the treacherous plan in which Lauretta had assisted him, and which was so fortunately baffled by the Marquis di Mirandola.”

“ And how,” enquired Agnes, “ was that plan frustrated?—I have much to learn.—I often wished to know how Sigismond effected his escape.”

“ And I will willingly relate it to you, dearest Agnes,” replied Sigismond. “ You recollect, no doubt, the night when you pointed out to me the secret passage from your apartment ;—when I had advanced some way, I pondered whether I ought not to return, since assuredly it would be discovered

covered which way I had escaped, and might involve you in trouble ; but recollecting that important events hung on my obtaining my liberty, though I knew not then how peculiarly they involved myself, I advanced, with much difficulty and toil, through passages almost choaked up with rubbish, and perplexed by windings. I spent the greatest part of the night in searching for an outlet, and almost feared I should be left there to perish for want ; for, after daylight, to return would be impossible, even if I could have borne again to expose myself to the sufferings I had already fled from. At length, however, I found the outlet, but discovered that the windings of the passage had very much deceived me, as I had concluded that I should be at some distance from the inhabited part of the castle ; this, however, was not the case, and as daylight was rapidly advancing, it was necessary for me to exert my utmost speed to escape undiscovered from so dangerous a spot. That I succeeded, however, the event sufficiently evinces ;

evinces; and having succeeded also in the purpose of my journey, which was to induce the two venerable Fathers, Buonafede and Zadeski, to accompany me hither, in order to examine into the truth of the several circumstances that appeared so mysterious; I was returning to the castle, and, as I doubted of obtaining admittance at the usual entrance, I was proceeding to reconnoitre the secret passages, when I was alarmed by a sound that seemed advancing to meet me, and in a few moments I distinguished Vitalba, and some of the servants I had seen at the castle. I was not long before I discovered the villanous purpose he was engaged in, and instantly attacking him, and being most bravely seconded by those who were with me, I had the good fortune to wound and secure the principal villains, and to persuade the rest to assist in my return to the castle."

"You speak slightly," said Agnes, "of my obligations to you; but I see that I am indebted to you for more than life."

"There

“ There is one way,” said Zadeski, “ in which you can repay these obligations, and gratitude calls upon you not to hesitate.”

The young Marquis protested against such a plea being set up, however it might strengthen his hopes. He could not bear to owe to any motive but genuine, unaffected love, that blessing which yet he should die to lose.

Agnes, overpowered by the contest, by the united wishes of all present, and by the increasing emotions of her own heart, held out her hand to Sigismund, entreating him not to scrutinize too nearly into all the motives to which he owed it, lest he should be too well satisfied. She insisted, however, on spending some time in a Convent, till the cruel wounds, so recently made, should be somewhat healed ; and with this the Marquis was forced to rest contented.

Amid the general joy, however, the Lady Hypolita alone retained any uneasiness :— she could not wholly recover from the cruel stigmas the barbarous policy of Rezzonico,

had thrown upon her fame ;—that she had never deserved them, was not for a moment doubted by any one ; but when the venerable Bertoldo, now nearly recovered from the effects of his sufferings, appeared amongst them, the warmth of his suffrage to her uncommon merit, and the clear testimony by which he established the fact of her having concerted her escape, satisfied even her delicate mind. It was his to avow the contrivance by which the whole household had been deceived by the report of her death : The corpse, which had been procured, was attired in her habiliments, and her ring, the topaz which Sigismond had remarked, had been placed there purposely to assist the deception.—Yet established as her happiness seemed now to be, it yet received a sensible addition in the restoration of Nerina, who beheld her beloved mistress with an ecstasy of joy and wonder, that called forth the sympathy of all the spectators ; nor could her affectionate heart restrain its overflowings at the sight of her young Lord, to ensure
whose

whose safety, in his infancy, she had so nobly encountered so many perils.

At this crisis the messenger, who had been sent to Pontalti for the papers mentioned by Meilcôur, returned, bringing only some trifling memorandums, which they could only conclude he had mentioned in that important manner to add new distress to that his atrocious conduct had occasioned.

Every doubt being thus fully done away, Voltorno became once more the seat of gaiety and hospitality; and it was the general hope that the miseries arising from a Trans-Alpine marriage were now for ever at an end. Even Agnes was induced to overcome her scruples, and to seal at once the felicity of the Marquis, sooner than she at first intended, out of compliment to Zadeski, whose indefatigable and generous exertions in the cause of Mirandola deserved the utmost gratitude; and who, though he wished to witness the final consummation of their happiness, was yet eager to return to the retirement he loved.

The Villa Salviati too, where their loves had first begun, was ever a favourite retreat, after Time had fully shewn to each the value of the blessing in possession. In those interesting scenes they loved to retrace the various circumstances of their lives, and to recal the hours endeared by so many tender remembrances.

The singular events which led to so happy a termination were faithfully recorded, for the benefit of the rising race of Mirandola ; who were carefully taught that virtuous intentions are of small avail without fortitude and constancy ; and were always instructed to keep in view the noble motto of their House, and to be in all circumstances, however trying, uniformly *faithful and firm*.

FINIS.